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JANUARY

Weird Tales

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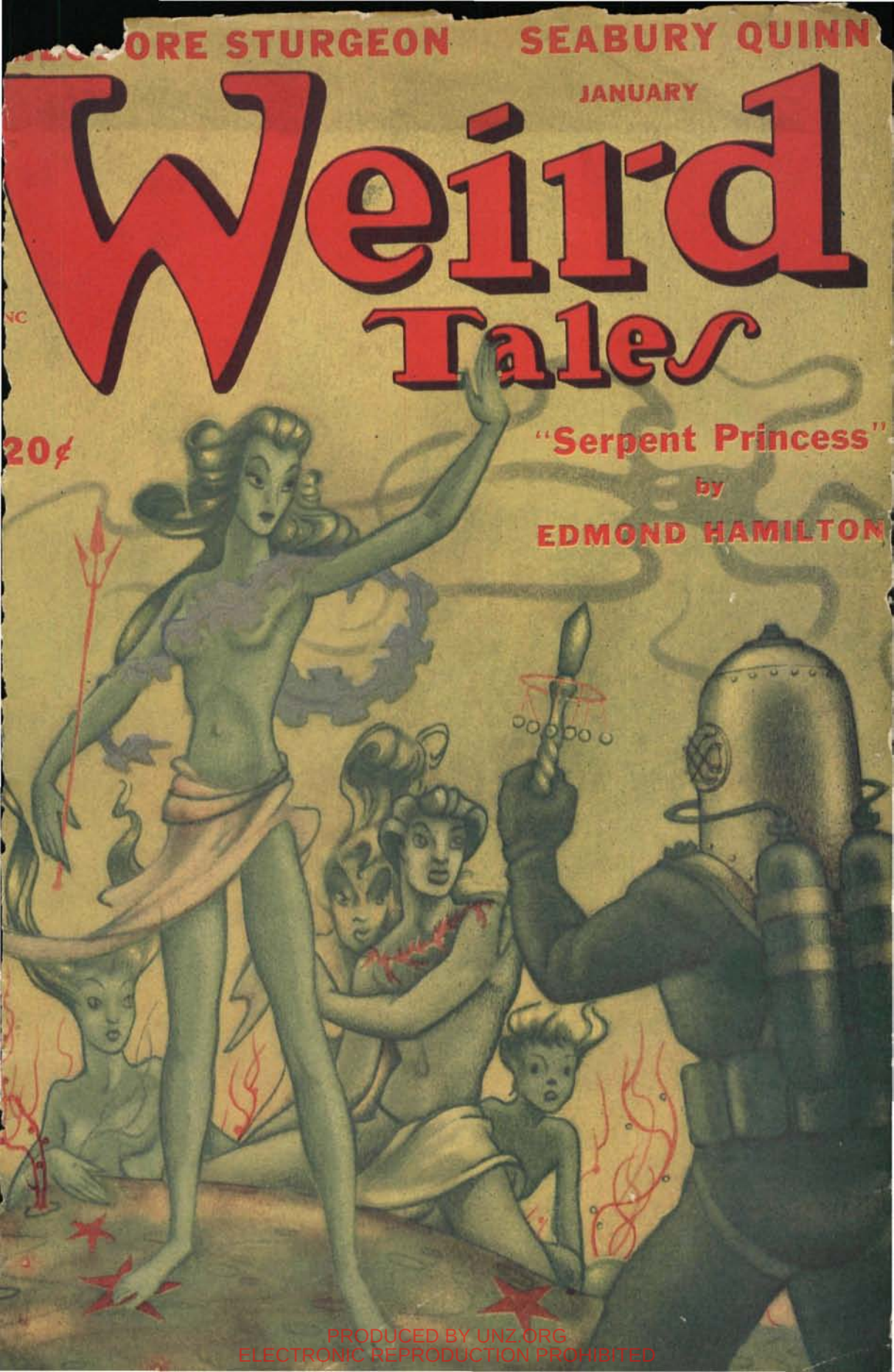
"Serpent Princess"

by

EDMOND HAMILTON



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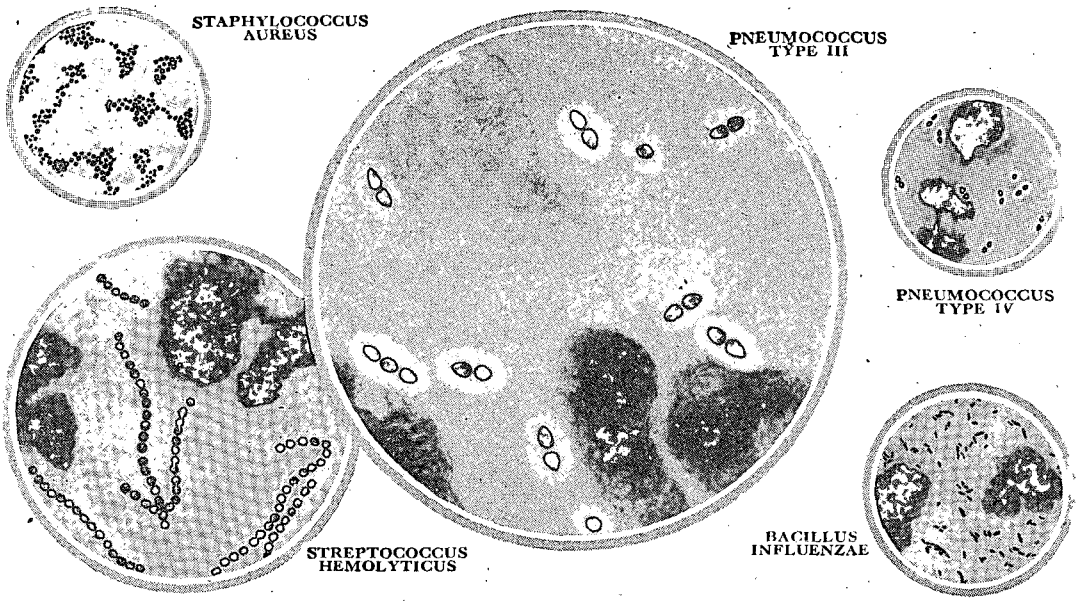

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Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

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NOVELETTES

SERPENT PRINCESS . . . . . Edmond Hamilton 6
A place dedicated to death is unwholesome for the living until they, too, join the restless legions of the Beyond

THE DEADLY RATIO . . . . . Theodore Sturgeon 22
No man has greater love than that he feels for his Dream Girl. But what if she suddenly, actually materializes?

THE FRIGHTENED ENGINEER . . . . . Allison V. Harding 66
No wonder he was frightened. For when a dreadful guess became a certainty. . . .

SHORT STORIES

AND GIVE US YESTERDAY . . . . . Seabury Quinn 38
Only beyond—normal forces can cancel out the last bugle call of death. Who can dare the ageless evil of those forces?

THE GREEN BROTHERS TAKE OVER . . . . . Maria Moravsky 47
Other forms of life live differently. And they revenge themselves on their enemies differently

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO LOST VALLEY . . . . . Stephen Grendon 57
Trains go a lot of strange places, some places where they never should go

GRANDFATHER McGRAW . . . . . Roger S. Vreeland 81
The condemned man had but one request before he went to the gallows. A request as simple as life itself

THE LORENZO WATCH . . . . . Carl Jacobi 85
He had a knack for that sort of thing, was all. Anything in Blackwell Marsh alive or—more likely—dead, he could find

VERSE

MOON-MARKED . . . . . S. Omar Barker 21

WEIRDISMS . . . . . Lee Brown Coye 80

THE EYRIE 4

THE WEIRD TALES CLUB 95

Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 20 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, $1.00. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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173

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A. Vol. 40, No. 2

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.* LAMONT BUCHANAN, *Associate Editor.*

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WHENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

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Twenty-five Years

THE twenty-fifth anniversary issue of WEIRD TALES is our next; two months away as the crow flies (to your newsstand, and it might better be a bat!)

Twenty-five years in some ways does not seem so long a time. But in a literary sense, in the magazine world it's a tidy bit of mileage. We are reminded of it every time we contemplate our bound, dark-green-covered volumes of WEIRD TALES stretching across the office shelves, side to side, going back through the years to the periodical's infancy.

With all due modesty we think there've been a lot of fine stories written by many fine authors in these pages through the years. WEIRD TALES was not always the established publication it is today. It had to make its way and weather its share of vicissitudes. It had to prove to its readers—a gratifying proportion of whom are persons who've read the magazine for years—that it could bring to them the particular type of fantasy "weird" fiction they wanted and expected. Not for one issue, but over and over again.

WEIRD TALES realizes that it is a virtual impossibility to please *every* reader with *every* story but we think we know our good family of customers very well by now.

With the eight to eleven stories per issue of WEIRD we manage to keep them happy—or if not, we hear about it rapidly enough! It is nice to be this close to your public, for then it is not just a slogan but very real to say that the magazine, what it stands for and tries to do really belong to you.

That is particularly true of the next issue, which is our twenty-fifth anniversary number. To the best of our ability we have included those authors we not only *believed* you wanted, but those you *told* us should be included.

At this point and from here we can say—it looks as though you've chosen mighty well!

READERS' VOTE

SERPENT PRINCESS
THE DEADLY RATIO
THE FRIGHTENED ENGINEER
AND GIVE US YESTERDAY
THE GREEN BROTHERS TAKE OVER
THE NIGHT TRAIN TO LOST VALLEY
GRANDFATHER McGRAW
THE LORENZO WATCH

Here's a list of eight stories in this issue. Won't you let us know which three you consider the best? Just place the numbers 1, 2, and 3 respectively against your three favorite tales—then clip it out and send it to us.

WEIRD TALES
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The above are in preparation and will be released soon. *Immediately* available are a series of pamphlets featuring Howard, Bloch, Flagg, Keller, Lovecraft and other *Weird Tales* favorites.

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Serpent Princess

BY EDMOND HAMILTON

HUGH MACKLIN told himself that he was acting more like an imaginative boy than a serious, thirty-year-old archaeologist. But that couldn't stop the vague, meaningless dread that oppressed him.

He had lain awake for hours, on his narrow camp-cot. And it was not the hot closeness of the air inside the little tent, nor the solemn boom of surf from the nearby Persian Gulf, that had prevented him from sleeping.

"The wrath of Anu, lord of the sky; of Enlil, lord of the wind; of Adad, lord of the lightning; be on him who again opens this temple and uses its instrument to awaken evil Tiamat and her folk!"

That terrific invocation ran through Macklin's mind now, as it had ever since morning when they had first uncovered the blocked, sealed entrance of their great find, the temple of Tiamat.

De Ferdey, head of the expedition, had translated the crumbling columns of age-old cuneiform, his high-pitched voice shrill with excitement. The elderly little scholar had almost babbled, when Macklin and Thorpe confirmed his reading by independent translation.

"A temple dedicated to the serpent-goddess Tiamat! This proves that it's the oldest find in Babylonian archaeology! It makes Woolley's work at Ur, and de Morgan's at Elam, look modern!"

Roos, the hulking, fat Dutch artist who was sketcher for the De Ferdey Expedition, was the only one who had looked troubled then.

He had stood with them in the sandy excavation on the very shore of the blue Gulf, staring with puzzled eyes at the square, massive little stone building and the inscribed blocks that sealed its doorway.

"But why?" he had asked. "Why should they have put so terrific a curse on their own temple?"

"Enki wither his body, Nergal freeze his soul, Shamash burn him in fire, who awakens again those of the abyss whom I, Marduk, have bound!"

"Tiamat was the serpent-goddess of the sea-deeps, in ancient Babylonian legend," De Ferdey had explained. "She and her evil race were supposed to have been chained somehow by Marduk, ancient hero-king."

The little scholar's eyes had kindled. "It's always been supposed Marduk was only a solar myth—but this inscription proves he really lived! A ruler of the world's dawn who suppressed the worship of Tiamat!

"We'll know more of this when we open the temple tomorrow!"

Tomorrow was only hours away, now. And still Macklin had not been able to sleep, because of that vague oppression.

It was ridiculous, he told himself in renewed self-disgust. The people who had carved that inscription had been dust six thousand years and more. They and their invocations and curses were merely material now for a scholarly monograph.

Macklin knew an old trick of sleep he had learned from an Asian shaman. He

A hidden temple full of people dead thousands of years should make an archaeologist's life—yet it might mean his death!

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Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

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used it now, willing his feet, his limbs, his body, to relax.

He slept. And, it seemed instantly, the vague oppression that he had felt leaped suddenly into horror.

THE sound came first. Faint and distant, the mere echo of a memory of a sound. It crept to him through the night and touched him with delicate cold fingers, and somehow he knew what the sound was. Someone, long ago in another world, had struck a great crystal bell. Hugh Macklin could hear it speaking still, clear and sweet and wicked, like the pulsing of an alien heart.

In his dream, Macklin saw himself rise and go out of the tent, because the bell-note called him and he knew that he must go.

He stood on the shore of the dark sea, looking outward, and now the crystal singing of the bell blended with the voices of the waves and the sea wind, but was strengthened rather than lost. It called him still, and Hugh Macklin followed, out into the sea.

The black water closed over his head. He was not afraid of the water. He was not conscious of cold or the need to breathe. He felt himself gliding swiftly downward, deeper and deeper into the gulf, and still the bell sang to him.

He was afraid of the bell. Terribly afraid. And yet as he plunged downward into the utter blackness of the ocean bed he was aware of a growing excitement, an eagerness that ran through him like sudden fire.

Then a strange knowledge came to him, though in his dream it did not seem strange. The lovely crystalline voice of the bell was only the stronger echo of another voice, more delicate, more beautiful, more evil.

The voice of a woman, calling from the long night shadows of the sea.

Pale phosphorescence, pale spreading light like the silver radiance of stars. Macklin knew that he was almost *there*. He saw the great cliffs rising sheer behind their veils of water, and the long clean stretch of sand and whitened shells that was the ocean floor. He saw—the city.

Crystal towers, cut from the clear green-white crests of breaking waves. Walls of coral and floors of the shining silver sand. He passed over the clustered roofs, where they lay between the two folding arms of the black cliffs. He looked down, and saw the blurred, still shapes that slept in the crystal chambers, dreaming dreams as old as the sea.

But he did not pause. He rushed on, with a terrible hungry eagerness.

Above the city, apart from it, like a diamond on some great primal altar, a crystal palace stood on a ledge of rock. And the woman's voice spoke in Hugh Macklin's soul, and it was glad, and full of power.

The bright walls flowed past him like a broken star, and he was in the palace.

Upward through the silent gleaming halls, moving with the floating smoothness of a dream. Upward past vaulted chambers where the great golden doors stood open, swinging with the stately breathing of the sea. Upward to the highest tower, and the stillness was deeper than death.

She waited for him, there.

No one barred the way. No guard was at the door but a flight of little fish like a shower of butterflies. She had no handmaids, no courtiers, no one to attend her. But even now she had worshippers. Great shadowy creatures hung in the clear water around her as she slept, their fins moving slowly, slowly, and a long coiling shape curled lovingly around her, its shining head upon her shoulder, watching with cold strange eyes.

Macklin saw these things vaguely, as he saw the high clear vault of the roof and the couch whereon she lay, that was like an open shell and glowed like mother of pearl. But they did not matter. *She* was all that mattered.

Her voice would be like a faery bell, ringing silver in his heart. If she moved, her body would have the grace of all the sea's bright children, sinuous strength, wonderful ease and quickness. Her limbs were smooth, shaped out of the joyous whiteness of foam, and it seemed a pity that they should be so still.

She was human and yet she was not human. She was more beautiful than any

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human woman Macklin had ever seen. She was beautiful like the morning of the world, when the gods were born out of sunlight and sea-waves and the strength of the wind. There was no weakness in her, no fear, no change. The heavy trampling feet of the ages of mankind had never touched her, and somehow Macklin knew that to her there was no such thing as death.

It was a pity that she slept. A pity that such wondrous life must be so still.

HE LOOKED into her face, her lovely face that had in it a shining wickedness so far beyond the petty evils of human life that it ceased to have the meaning of wrong as Macklin knew it. Her shadowed eyelids brushed her cheeks with gleaming lashes, and Macklin's heart was wrung with the pain of it, that she slept and he could not look into her eyes.

But she could speak to him! Macklin heard the singing crystal voice clearly in his mind now, and knew that it was her mind that spoke to his.

"Yes, my mind," came her sweet whisper of thought. "*It* is not chained in sleep, like my body. It can reach out and draw other minds to me—as it has drawn yours."

In his dream, Macklin's thought was awed, his hungry eagerness tempered by dread.

"You are—the goddess Tiamat?" he murmured.

"The *princess* Tiamat!" rang the answer. "Yes, princess of the older human race—the race who went back to the sea from the land, as the great sea-reptiles and the great whales went back."

Her speech, her thought, rushed swift and shining now through Macklin's dazed and dreaming mind.

"We of the sea were older—and wiser—than the men of land. That is why we sought to teach the brutish, barbarous land-folk our arts and wisdom. And we taught them much."

Macklin felt the heavy weight of ages of time in Tiamat's brooding thought.

"The land-folk called us, by a great bell whose sound was power. They called and we answered, rising from the sea to instruct them. We gave them the first elements of civilization. We even brought many of them by our arts to this sea-city, land men who dwelt with us here in the sea! And they worshipped us as gods.

"All except Marduk, their king. He was jealous of us. He hid his hatred until he had learned our arts of magic science from us. And then Marduk proclaimed us as evil, and used our own arts against us to bind us in this paralyzed, death-like sleep!"

Like silver flame blazed the bitter wrath in Tiamat's thought, and then Macklin felt it sink back to dull despair.

"Sleeping, sleeping, as age on age has rolled across the earth—but only our bodies! And that was the horror of the fate that treacherous Marduk fastened on us, that our minds should remain wakeful!"

In his dream, Macklin's heart wrung to pity for her.

"Tiamat, can you never be awakened? Can you never live again?"

Swift came her answer. "There is one way! The great bell in the temple on the shore—the bell by which long ago the land-folk called to us! Its vibration can shatter the paralysis in which Marduk bound us! It would awaken us!

"The bell still exists! Marduk dared not *destroy* it, for the very act of destruction would have sounded the bell and awakened us! He could but seal it up, with a curse upon it. You have but to open the sealed temple. First break the inscription on the outer block—"

"First break the inscription," Macklin murmured mechanically.

"—and then pull the center blocks aside," prompted Tiamat's silver whisper.

"The center blocks—" Macklin repeated, again.

Suddenly, in his dream, it seemed to him that the whole undersea world about him heaved and rocked to a violent shock.

And then it was all wavering and fading, the weird sea-city below and the crystal tower in which he was, and the pearly couch on which Tiamat's sleeping, unhumanly-human body lay.

"Macklin! Macklin!" a thunderous voice seemed roaring through the waters as all darkened and faded. "*Wake up!*"

Macklin opened dazed eyes. It was

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Thorpe's voice he heard, and Thorpe's square, aggressive face was close to his as the other shook his shoulders violently.

"Macklin, what are you doing?"

Macklin looked dazedly around. He was not now in his tent. He stood in the moonlight at the sealed entrance of the temple of Tiamat.

But that entrance was no longer sealed! Hands had torn aside the blocks inscribed with Marduk's curse and warning!

His hands, Macklin suddenly realized! His fingers were bruised and bloody where they had torn at the blocks. In his sleep, in his dream, he had opened the long-sealed temple of Tiamat!

IN THE moonlight, Thorpe's aggressive face showed his astonishment and bewilderment.

"Why did you open the temple secretly? Why not wait till morning as we planned?"

"I didn't know what I was doing," Macklin stammered. "I was sleepwalking, dreaming—"

Dreaming? Of a sudden, he felt an aching sorrow that Tiamat's unearthly beauty had only been a dream.

He saw her again as he had seen her in that weird vision, sleeping in her crystal palace tower down deep beneath the sea, her loveliness warded and watched by grotesque creatures of the deep.

But had it been only—dream? Had not her mind urged him to open the temple and sound the mysterious bell that could awaken her again to life? And had he not, at the very moment he dreamed that, been blindly tearing aside the inscribed blocks to enter the temple?

Fear settled upon Macklin's mind like thin ice forming on a pool. A dream that could take possession of a man's mind and body like that, was more than dreaming!

New voices aroused him from his brooding.

De Ferdey and Roos had been awakened by Thorpe's shouting, and were approaching.

De Ferdey, his scrawny little figure ridiculous in a brilliant dressing-gown, had anger on his pinched face.

"Thorpe, what are you and Macklin doing? You had no right to open the temple without me!"

Thorpe shrugged. "I found Macklin doing it. He says it was somnambulism, a dream."

Jan Roos' hulking, obese figure stiffened, his moon face and round blue eyes showing how much he was startled.

"A dream?" rumbled the fat Dutch artist. "I too was having one when I awoke —a *verdommt* nightmare about *that*."

He gestured with his flabby hand across the little strip of beach toward the moonlit, heaving expanse of the Gulf.

Macklin looked at him swiftly. Had the Dutchman too dreamed of—Tiamat?

Unreasoning, hot jealousy flared for an instant in Macklin's mind, at the thought that his strange dream-tryst with that sleeping princess beneath the sea had been shared by Roos.

Next moment, he was appalled by his own reaction. Was he cracking up mentally, to harbor such crazy ideas?

He got a grip on himself. "I'm sorry about the temple, sir," he told De Ferdey. "I guess I've been so eager about opening it, that when I started sleepwalking I went and did it."

The little scholar looked placated. "I suppose there's no harm done, Macklin. But if some of our Arab workers sneaked inside before morning, they might loot it."

"I'll stand guard," Thorpe offered. De Ferdey nodded assent and turned away. "I suggest we go back to bed."

Jan Roos looked at Macklin a little furtively as they parted outside the tents. "Macklin, this dream of yours—" he began.

Again, Macklin felt the prick of senseless jealousy, and it made his answer curt.

"There's no point in discussing nightmares. Good night, Jan."

In his tent, he did not go back to his cot. He lit his gasoline lantern and sat sprawled in a camp-chair, smoking mechanically as his mind churned.

Never before had he experienced the unpleasant sensation of losing control even briefly of his own body's action. And it had shaken him.

He told himself that he had to reason it out or it would leave a scar of fear on his subconscious.

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"It's easy enough to explain," he assured himself. "The inscription on the temple, cursing anyone who might want to 'awaken Tiamat,' was what triggered off my mind."

Macklin had been steeped for a half-score of years in Babylonian archaeology, in the faith and thought of those men of ancient Sumer who had first of all men reared a civilization.

And their great legend of how Marduk, the warrior magician-king, had conquered and bound evil Tiamat and her serpent-folk of the sea, was so familiar to him that it had sprung alive in his dreaming mind.

"Yet there were some things in the dream that are *not* in the legend," Macklin thought, puzzledly.

He got out his reference books and leafed through the pages of transliteration from ancient cuneiform which told the epic story of that primal conflict.

"Evil and beautiful was Tiamat, of the serpent people of the sea. Evil taught she from the waters to the sons of men, luring them by her bright beauty to deathly life beneath the sea. Spirit of heaven remember! Spirit of earth remember!"

Like a stern voice out of dim ages spoke to Macklin this saga of an ancient and awful conflict.

"By their own tricks of force did Marduk conquer the serpent folk, binding Tiamat and her horde in sleep, to waken not till the world dies. Spirit of heaven remember! Spirit of earth remember!"

MACKLIN went through the pages twice, seeking reference to that part of his dream in which Tiamat had spoken of a great bell that had been used to summon her, and that now could awaken her.

He found no such reference. But that, he reasoned, must have been a fictive detail supplied by his own imagination. For all the rest of his dream obviously came from his own memory of the ancient legend.

The assurance quieted his shaken nerves. Even so, he was reluctant to sleep again. But when he did sleep, no further dreams came.

In the glare of morning sunlight, Hugh Macklin felt a little foolish as he recalled the night.

"Just nerves," he muttered as he shaved. "Too much of ancient Babylon. I need a dose of New York, night-clubs, subways."

Thorpe, yawning and stretching, greeted them when they went to the temple on the sandy shore.

Their white-robed Arab workmen, curious to see the result of their long digging, stood in the background as De Ferdey, twitching with eagerness, directed the removal of the rest of the blocks that filled the massive door.

"The most ancient type of Sumerian masonry!" burbled the little scholar. "Careful not to crack those blocks! Now we'll have a look inside!"

De Ferdey could walk in upright, but the rest of them had to stoop in the low doorway.

THE angling beams of their heavy flashlights showed the interior of the temple as a single dark, oblong, windowless room. Directly in front of them rose a low stone pier four feet high.

It was inscribed, but it was not the inscription but the thing that lay upon the pier that first caught their eyes.

"Why, it's a sistrum!" De Ferdey exclaimed, amazed. "But not like the Egyptian or any other known type."

The thing was a thick, foot-long bar of gold, with a handle midway by which it could be held. Projecting from the bar were seven little sistra on whose golden wires were strung tiny crystal spheres.

Thorpe was excitedly translating the inscription graven deep in the pier.

"The power of Marduk, the wisdom of Marduk, the scepter of Marduk, whose force can freeze and bind!"

Macklin picked it up, shook it slightly. The little crystal spheres chimed together on their golden wires.

Faint as was the note, it seemed for an instant to pierce his ears and brain. He felt himself reeling—

"Put it down!" ordered De Ferdey. "That sound is excruciating in this confined space."

An exclamation from Jan Roos made them swing around. The obese Dutch artist was playing his flashlight beam upon the walls of the room.

His fat face was suddenly strange. And

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as Hugh Macklin looked up, he felt an equal impact of emotion.

"Those mural paintings—they're odd," De Ferdey was saying puzzledly, behind Macklin.

The ancient murals of Tiamat's temple were more than odd, to Macklin. They were stunning.

For they showed a city beneath the sea—a city of crystal towers and walls of coral, and floors of silver sand. Above the city on a great ledge glittered a crystal palace, and about palace and city swam serpentine humans who were not quite human.

"The same scene, exactly the same scene, that I saw in my dream last night!" gasped Macklin.

De Ferdey looked startled, for a moment. But then he said, "You must have squirmed in and had a look, while you were sleepwalking."

"But I too—" Roos began, and then fell silent.

Macklin noticed now that in the pictured undersea city, beside the swimming serpentine sea-folk, there walked ordinary men—men in ancient Sumerian dress, men with blind-staring eyes and strange faces.

He remembered that in his dream, Tiamat had said the sea-folk brought landmen somehow living to their city. And he remembered also a phrase of the ancient legend he had read during the night.

"Evil taught Tiamat to the sons of men, luring them by her bright beauty to deathly life beneath the sea."

"Look what I've found back here!" called Thorpe, his voice pitched high with excitement.

AT THE back of the temple room, a well eight feet across yawned in the stone paving. It was a black mouth of water, obviously connecting by a passage with the sea that boomed on the nearby shore.

On either side of the well rose a stone pillar, and the two pillars supported a massive stone cross-bar from which hung a bell.

The bell was of shimmering crystal, flaring out six feet from the ring at its top to its curving lip. It was inscribed with characters that were not Sumerian nor any other human language. And it hung with its lower third submerged in the black water.

Macklin felt a deadly tightness close upon his heart. "The bell of Tiamat!" he whispered. "The bell by which long ago they summoned her, and that now can awaken her!"

He knew, now. He knew that his strange vision of the night could not have been mere dream built of memory.

For in the ancient legends, in his memory of them, was no mention of such a bell. But the bell, the bell that Marduk could not destroy without reawakening Tiamat's folk, was here!

Then Hugh Macklin suddenly shouted. "Roos, *don't!*"

Beside the crystal bell, there hung from the stone cross-bar a massive crystal mace, a striker. Nobody but Jan Roos had noticed it.

Roos had seen and grasped it, and was lifting it to strike the crystal bell. And a terror born in dream suddenly brought that cry of dread from Macklin's lips.

Roos paused, glaring at Macklin with eyes that at this moment were not the Dutch artist's naive blue eyes at all.

"And why not?" he asked thickly. "Why not sound the bell?"

Macklin, seeing the glazed, strange look in the other's eyes, knew beyond all doubt that Roos *knew*.

"You can't!" he cried. "It means—"

Thorpe was staring at them puzzledly, but De Ferdey's shrill voice intervened.

"Macklin is right—do you want to take a chance of cracking this bell?" he sputtered at Roos. "It's an invaluable relic!"

Slowly, Roos let the mace fall. It swung like a heavy crystal pendulum by the heavy gold wire that held it to the cross-bar.

"This place is unprecedented!" De Ferdey was babbling joyfully, now. "I'd like to see their faces in Philadelphia when we publish this!"

The little scholar peremptorily motioned them out of the dark stone room.

"Don't touch a thing until we can photograph everything *in situ!*"

Macklin was the photographer of the expedition. He was glad of that, for the pressure of excited work that day kept him

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from thinking. And he dreaded to think.

He wanted not even to consider the implications of a dream that anticipated reality—a dream of beauty and horror that had wrenched his heart with a great throb of mixed fear and desire when Roos had almost struck the bell.

He had wanted that bell to sound. He had wanted it because something deep in his mind knew that its sounding would awaken that dream-visioned sleeping sea-princess whose beauty was still an ache in his heart.

But even more deeply he had dreaded the sounding of the bell, for there was that in him which knew it was a tocsin for unutterable evil.

"We've made the find of the century!" De Ferdey exulted at dinner that night. "There must be other incalculably ancient relics in this region. We'll comb this whole coast!"

He told them that he had sent up to Basra for boats and diving-equipment.

"There has probably been subsidence here—we may find much more under the shallow waters along shore."

Hugh Macklin hardly listened. He was watching Roos across the table. The big Dutchman was unusually silent.

But his moonlike face was colorless, strange. Time and again, Macklin saw the man's eyes shift through the open door of the tent to the dark, tumbling sea.

Macklin could no longer doubt that the Dutchman too had dreamed, that a strange call from the sea had come to him too, that—

He clenched his fist beneath the table and silently told himself, "I am Hugh Macklin of Ardmore, Pennsylvania, and I am a scientist, and I blindly believe no thing that can't be proved."

It didn't work. It didn't take the shadow of that incredible memory out of his brain.

Lying on his back in his dark tent later, he felt that his defenses against the impossible were weakening. For now it seemed to him that in the breathlessness of the night there was something hushed and fearfully expectant, in the shout of the surf something *joyously* expectant.

"I am Hugh Mackling—"

Clang!

Earth and sea and sky seemed suddenly vibrating to that distant, muted silvery sound.

It was not loud to his ears. It was a ghost-sound, touching octaves of sonic vibration that his hearing could barely attain.

Clang!

Again, the ringing note, its swelling pulse making complex counterpoint with the first note's echoes, moving fast and far—

Macklin found himself on his feet, shaking. "Roos! He's sounding the bell of Tiamat!"

FEAR flung Macklin out of his tent like a giant hand, and urged him in a stumbling run along the moonlit shore.

It was not fear for himself. It was a quaking dread that that summoning bell might cause an impossible thing to happen—a thing that would forever shatter for him the solid-seeming surface of the ordinary world.

"It couldn't happen!" he told himself prayerfully. "It couldn't! But if it did—"

The intolerable ringing sweetness of the bell had died away. But on his right, as he ran, the black sea boomed hoarsely jubilant on the beach.

Tiamat's temple came into sight, low, squat and gray in the moonlight, its open door staring out to sea like a blind eye.

"Roos!" yelled Macklin, as he pitched forward.

Then he had his answer. But not from Roos. It came from far out on the heaving black ocean, out where great billows leaning toward land flung white spray-lace at the moon.

Over the sound of wind and wave there came from far seaward, a silver, singing cry. A high, sweet shout, throbbing with superhuman exultation.

Hugh Macklin stopped dead, seized by a cold breathlessness. He strained his eyes seaward.

"Tiamat!" he choked.

Like a hoarse, loud echo, from nearer in the sea came the sobbing howl of a great voice.

"Tiamat!"

It was Jan Roos' voice that uttered that

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hoarse and eager cry. And now Macklin saw him.

The hulking Dutchman was floundering out through the shallows, half-stumbling and half-swimming, clumsily flailing his great arms.

He was going out to answer that silver, singing call, and already only his massive head was above the billows.

"Roos, wait! Wait!" yelled Macklin, breaking the spell and running out into the surf.

Roos never turned. He floundered madly on, toward—

Toward what? Was it a glistening, coiling white woman-shape that swam those distant wave-crests with lithesome ease? Was it that, or curling foam?

Then Hugh Macklin glimpsed white arms flung up from the waves toward the moon, glimpsed an exultant face, heard again the joyous, pulsing cry. And again, Roos shouted as he plunged on.

For a moment, Macklin glimpsed the two heads together—then saw white arms like supple serpents coil around Roos' neck, and heard the Dutchman's wild shout of *joy* as he sank beneath the billows.

And then there was only the wind, and the surf on the shore, and Hugh Macklin crying out across an empty, moonlit sea.

"Roos! Roos!"

Yet not horror for Roos' fate shook him most deeply, in this moment. The horror was there, but with it was blind jealousy.

Another had awakened Tiamat, another had answered her call and gone down with her into the sleeping city beneath the sea! He, Hugh Macklin, should have been her chosen—

Macklin knew later that he must have been very close to the brink of sanity at this moment, very close to hurling himself seaward in answer to that blind, aching impulse.

IT WAS the voices that held him—first the excited shouts of Arab laborers running toward the shore, and then the alarmed exclamations of Thorpe and De Ferdey as they dragged him back out of the surf.

"Macklin, what's happened?"

Hugh Macklin pointed seaward with a shaking hand. "Roos! He sounded the bell to awaken Tiamat, and she came and called him! And he went!"

He heard Thorpe swear and tell De Ferdey, "He's out of his head. Stay with him and quiet him down, while I find Roos."

Macklin sat on the sand with his head in his hands, hardly conscious of De Ferdey's nervous voice or the low voices of the scared Arabs. Then Thorpe came back.

"Roos isn't here anywhere, sir! Macklin, exactly what happened?"

Macklin told them. And he saw the growing incredulity on their faces as he told.

"It's *true!*" he finished desperately.

Thorpe spoke swiftly to De Ferdey. "I don't doubt that Roos did throw himself in, sir. He and Macklin have both been acting queerly. I'll take Macklin back to his tent and give him some luminal."

The drug drew a thick, wooly blanket over Macklin's mind, with merciful quickness.

When he awoke, the late afternoon sun was slanting through the door of the tent. Thorpe sat in a camp-chair watching him, his square brown face thoughtful.

"Feeling better?" he asked Macklin casually. "Here, have some coffee."

The hot coffee from the thermos was black and bitter. Thorpe waited until he had drunk it, and lighted a cigarette.

"Now tell me all about last night, Macklin," he said quietly.

Hugh Macklin laughed mirthlessly. "I see. You're trying to humor the madman."

"Bosh!" retorted Thorpe. "You're not crazy. Roos may have been, a little. He was a high-strung, nervous type, for all his fat. But you've just had a little too much work, heat and flies."

Macklin shrugged. "It's a good explanation. Only it isn't so. Now listen."

He forced himself to talk carefully and coolly. Thorpe listened without attempt to interrupt, till he had finished.

Then he spoke deliberately. "You really believe, then, that the sounding of that bell awakened a sleeping woman in the sea?"

Macklin hesitated. "Not a woman—not as we know women. They're a different

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kind of humanity, a species of man that split off long ago and went back to the sea. This is perhaps the last remnant of that offshoot human species.

"And Tiamat was not just sleeping. It must have been a queer form of suspended animation, the vital nervous centers paralyzed by some application of force. It's been done with animals in the labs."

"I see," said Thorpe. "And you think that Marduk did that to Tiamat long ago? And that the bell's vibration could break that paralysis and thus awaken her from suspended animation?"

Macklin flushed. "I know it sounds fantastic. But what other explanation is there?"

"The common-sense one," Thorpe said forcefully. "You and Roos were both tired, nervous, excited by our finding of the temple. The temple of Tiamat suggested a weird dream to your tired mind—"

"A dream in which I heard the bell, remember!" Macklin interrupted. "And at that time we didn't know there was such a bell inside the temple."

"You were sleepwalking—you must have squirmed inside and seen those mural paintings and the bell," Thorpe insisted. "It's the only logical explanation."

"But I *saw* Tiamat out there on the waves, calling to Roos!" exclaimed Macklin.

"By your own account, you saw something vague and white," Thorpe retorted. "Sea-foam in the moonlight—your overwrought imagination supplied the rest."

HUGH MACKLIN hesitated. The part of his mind that clung desperately to the common-sense, everyday world wanted to believe Thorpe.

But he couldn't believe. He knew that Tiamat lived, and had awakened. And, most frightening of all, that belief brought him a strange, singing joy.

Thorpe pressed his argument. "Look, Macklin—I want you to get this feverish fancy out of your mind. There's one sure way to do it. That's to sound the bell tonight and let you see for yourself that nothing really happens."

Instantly, again, Hugh Macklin felt that powerful throb of mixed fear and desire. If the bell were sounded, would Tiamat come again?

Or was it as Thorpe said, mere delusion born of an overtired mind? He had to know, one way or another. He had to know.

"All right," he said, keeping his voice carefully even. "We'll do it."

When he and Thorpe went out of the tent into the gathering twilight a little later, they met De Ferdey. The little scholar was too upset to give Macklin much attention.

"The Arabs are threatening to leave!" he shrilled. "What happened last night aroused their superstitions. You know—the usual talk about the ruins of the ancients being accursed. And right when we may be on the verge of further discoveries!"

He pointed toward the flat boats and heaps of equipment that now lay drawn up on the beach nearby.

"The boats and the diving suits came this afternoon—we could maybe find a whole city in this shallow water. But if they leave—"

"I'll talk to them, later," soothed Thorpe. "A little higher wages should fix it. Right now, we're going to the temple."

De Ferdey stared, seeming to notice Macklin for the first time. "To the temple? For what? Macklin, have you got over your delirium?"

"Of course he has," Thorpe said hastily. "Come along, Macklin."

In the deepening darkness, the little oblong temple brooded still as though watching with its blind eye the eager, reaching hands of wave-foam that grabbled up the beach toward it.

THE moon was rising but it was very dark inside—so dark that Macklin could at first discern only the glimmer of the sistrum on the stone pier, and the vague, shimmering outline of the great crystal bell back in the deeper shadow.

His uncanny feeling of mingled hope and dread was getting stronger by the minute. He had a wild impulse to turn and flee, but knew that to do so would be to prove to Thorpe that his wits were tottering.

Thorpe turned, at the bell, and his voice

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was embarrassed. "Macklin, don't take offense. But you haven't been normal. And I don't want to take a chance of anything happening to you when I sound this bell."

Hugh Macklin was puzzled for a moment. "What do you mean?"

The other took a pair of leather straps from his pocket. "I want to secure you before I sound this bell. Sounds can have queer effects. I don't want you throwing yourself into the sea, too."

It took Macklin aback. He knew now that despite Thorpe's calm manner, the other thought him at least partly insane.

But he forced himself to nod assent. "All right. I quite understand."

Thorpe tied him around the shoulders with the straps, to one of the two stone pillars that supported the bell.

Then the other grasped and raised the heavy mace. "A sound is just a vibration of the air. Keep remembering that, Macklin."

Thorpe struck the bell.

It wasn't as Macklin had expected. It wasn't a faint, ringing pulse of sound such as he had heard the night before.

HE HAD been at a distance, then. But now he was right beside the crystal bell, inside the confined space of the little temple. The sound was different.

It was not like a sound at all. It was like an explosion of immaterial force that threatened to rive heaven and earth. A god might signal the end of a universe by such a mighty note.

Macklin, half-stunned, saw the water in the black well quivering wildly around the submerged bottom of the bell. The sound was going out through the water to the sea, out even faster and farther than it could go through air.

Thunderously drowning the ringing echoes came Thorpe's second stroke upon the bell. Another stroke followed, and another, until the dark little temple seemed crowded with raging, silvery sound.

Thorpe let the mace fall, and stood panting. "That was loud enough, wasn't it? And you see, nothing has happened."

Nothing? The last ringing reverberations were dying away, and Macklin's ears could now again detect the sound of the sea-wind and the boom of the dark surf out there beyond the open door.

Nothing? Why was it that the murmur of the wind suddenly strengthened, grew louder and keener, grew to a high, sweet singing cry outracing the leaping billows toward the land?

Macklin uttered a cry. "Thorpe, she *is* coming! Tiamat! I can hear her—"

Thorpe's voice broke in, taut with anxiety. "Macklin, get a grip on yourself! You have to conquer this thing in your mind right now!"

He pointed at the moonlit ocean out there beyond the open door and the beach.

"Can't you see that there's nothing there, that—"

Thorpe broke off. His shadowy figure became rigid as he stared.

For there was something out there on the moonlit sea. A slim shape, swimming with seal-smoothness toward the shore.

A serpentine white arm broke from the water, and dark hair swept back like wind-driven seaweed as a delicate, triangular face tilted moonward to utter that singing silver cry.

"Tiamat!" Macklin yelled again. "Thorpe, I told you—"

But Thorpe didn't hear him. Thorpe was striding out of the temple, toward the beach and the breaking waves.

"It's a woman, only a woman!" Thorpe's thick voice came back. "I'll prove it!"

Macklin knew that the man's matter-of-fact world was shattering beneath his feet, and that it was the supreme need for reassurance that drove him.

He saw Thorpe walk out until the breaking waves clasped his waist, staring fixedly ahead toward that white woman-shape that was swimming swiftly, swiftly, in toward him.

Macklin suddenly strained against the straps that bound him to the pillar, and yelled an incoherent warning.

He knew that Thorpe could not hear him. But Thorpe's own sudden dread spun the man around to start toward shore.

Swiftly, smoothly, flashed the lithesome swimming shape of Tiamat after him. In the moonlight, Thorpe's pallid face became suddenly ghastly as white arms *coiled* round his neck from behind.

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Macklin heard a cry of horror that mingled weirdly with a joyous silver shout. And then two heads went down.

HE GUESSED afterward that for a time he hung half-conscious in his straps. For his next clear sensation was of hands nervously unbinding him, and De Ferdey's shrill voice.

"I *saw!*" De Ferdey was shrilling, over and over. "I saw that—something—come in and drag Thorpe down!"

The little scholar was shaking, his hands quivering violently as he tried to unbuckle the straps.

"And the Arabs saw too! They've gone, fled! Macklin, what are we to do?"

A queer, cold calm had come upon Hugh Macklin's soul. He answered evenly.

"I am going out there, after them. After Tiamat. She will have no more victims."

De Ferdey recoiled from him a little. "Are you mad? Go out into the sea—drown yourself?"

"There are the diving-suits," Macklin answered. "They're tank-suits, self-contained, strong enough for any reasonable depth. I'm going in one of them."

His voice suddenly shouted. "What else can I do? We've wakened something ancient and evil, by our blundering disregard of Marduk's warning! As though our modern science was the only science that ever had existed!"

The little scholar wrung his hands! "It's mad, what you say! And yet—I saw!"

Macklin disregarded him in the next feverish hours. He assembled one of the diving-suits. It was a simple affair with duralumin oxygen-tank between the shoulders, devised for amateur divers in shallow waters.

He fastened the lead-weights to his belt, and then as the sun rose, clumped back on the lead-soled shoes toward the temple.

De Ferdey followed him fearfully. The little scholar watched wide-eyes as Macklin lifted the sistrum of Marduk from its inscribed pier and thrust it into his belt.

"Macklin, you're crazy!" he cried. "If you think that there is any power in that ancient magical instrument—"

Macklin's somber eyes traced the inscription on the stone. *"The power of Marduk, the wisdom of Marduk, the sceptre of Marduk, whose force can freeze and bind."*

Macklin said, "There was power in the bell."

He turned and went slowly toward the sea. The slow, swinging, ponderous tread of the heavy boots, the unhuman outlines of suit and helmet, gave him the look of some antediluvian god-thing striding toward judgment. With every movement the sistrum gave out a faint chime of sound, softer than a child's breathing, and yet Macklin thought that the waves shied from it like frightened horses in their landward rush.

He walked out into the surf, but this time there was no voice of singing crystal calling to him. The water closed over his head. He was afraid of the water. He was conscious of the cold, the crushing, numbing weight of it. This time he did not glide with the smooth bodiless ease of a dream. He walked, and his steps were slow and painful, and there was no joy in them.

Instinct, or the memory of his dream, led him toward the city, and it seemed to him that ages went by in the dark green depths of the sea, and his heart was heavier than the lead weights that held him down.

Pale phosphorescence, pale spreading light like the silver radiance of stars. The great cliffs rising sheer behind the veils of water, and the long clean stretch of sand. The crystal towers, carved from the crests of breaking waves. And above, on the black ledge of rock, the palace of Tiamat like a fallen star caught on the breast of a storm-cloud. And Hugh Macklin cried out in his heart, a broken, desperate shout of negation.

He had known that he would see it, as he had seen it all before. And yet it was a shock—to be awake, terribly awake, and see the country of a dream.

He knew that even after all that had happened he had still not quite believed. A man, if he were sane at all, could not quite believe. A man, if he were sane at all, could not help hoping that it had only been insubstantial dream.

He went on, across the sand and the crumbling shells, with the slow leaden tread of doom. The doom of all mankind,

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which had abdicated an ancient, alien glory for the sake of a human soul.

The sleepers no longer slept.

HE SAW them in the open spaces, bright beautiful shapes that sported with their cousins of the sea. Great gleaming fish went arrowing between the crystal towers, and the people of Tiamat played with them, more fleet, more graceful, than the perfect children of the sea. The game they played together was more than a frolic. It was a living hymn of joy because the long sleep was over, because the shackled bodies were free again. And the sea was glad, and her children welcomed back their gods.

Hugh Macklin walked between the coral walls of the city, and one by one the people of Tiamat stopped and watched him and drew back before him, and the fish ceased from their flashing play and watched him too, drifting motionless beside the white shoulders of their lords. It seemed to Macklin that the very motion of the sea had stopped, as though the water itself had life and were watching him.

His hand was on the shaft of the sistrum, and he could feel its chiming vibrant whisper as he moved.

Sceptre of Marduk, whose force can freeze and bind.

The people of Tiamat were afraid.

Macklin looked upward to the palace, and waited.

She came, as he had known she would. She came like a drift of pearly foam, bright as the morning sun, and her beauty was like a stabbing pain in Macklin's heart. Tears came hot and blinding to his eyes, and he shook them away because he must look at her, must see her clearly and for all time, because there would not again be light and loveliness in all the world for him.

Dark hair floating around the delicate face, the flesh like soft pearl, tender and radiant. The strong sweet shoulders and lifting breasts, the long line of the flanks and slender hips, the limbs that were all sinuous grace.

He tried to see where and how she differed from the human, and realized that the difference lay in inner structure. There was no stiffness, no awkward articulation of joints, no heaviness. Her bones were light and supple, and all the lines of her body and the motion of it were curving and perfect as the waves, without angularity or limitation. She was the original, the perfect creature, unmarred by the restricting shackles of evolution on the unfriendly land. She was the mold, and humanity was only the broken echo.

He wanted to fall down on his knees and worship her. More than that, he wanted to tear off the hampering suit that weighed his body and gather her loveliness into his arms and kiss her little curving mouth that had in it the laughter and the mocking joy of all the waters that ever danced in the morning of the world under a warm young sun.

He looked into her eyes.

He was sorry that he had. He was sorry that he had not been satisfied to remember her as he had seen her first, with her lids closed in sleep.

Dark mystic depths, and lighter shades like shallows over sand, and little errant glints of light like the touch of moonbeams. Knowledge long forgotten and visions half remembered were in her eyes.

They were eyes that had watched the banners of all the nations of man brighten and fade and go down into dust, and yet were not sad, but like the eyes of a child that watches an endless and fascinating play. Youth was in them, and joy, and above all they were the eyes of a woman and they smiled.

Hugh Macklin forgot the cold and crushing weight of the sea. He forgot the sceptre of Marduk, and the reason for his coming. Very softly he spoke her name—"Tiamat! Tiamat!"—and the sound of it inside his helmet was like the whisper of distant surf laughing at the shackled land.

The remembered voice of his dream spoke within his mind, like silver speech transformed to thought.

"Why have you come, Hugh Macklin?"

For a long time, he could not answer. The still sea waited, and the people of the city waited, and the great fish lay motionless and watching. The sistrum, too, was silent, unshaken by any motion of the water.

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And Hugh Macklin could not answer Tiamat because her eyes were on him, and he knew that she had known the answer to that question before he had left the temple, and she was laughing at him.

She was not afraid. Her people might fear, but not Tiamat. He knew that even Marduk had not been able to teach her fear.

Finally he answered hoarsely, speaking the thought that he knew her mind could hear.

"You know why I've come."

SHE had floated closer to him, imperceptibly. Her flesh glowed with the warm soft lustre of pearl. Macklin's hands reached out, unconsciously, blindly, and she laughed, a little silver ripple in his mind.

"I know," she said. "But do you?"

He had to tell her. He had to look into her eyes and tell her. The words hurt him, each one separately as he dragged them out.

"You're evil, Tiamat. You killed my friends. You—"

He stopped. It was hard to speak. Her body was long and wonderfully slender and her shoulders were like white coral under her dark floating hair. He tried again.

"I came to—"

He could not say it. It was blasphemy. It was worse even than if he said, *"I have come to kill you."* To chain that breathing vibrant loveliness in a living death—

Tiamat smiled and whispered, "You came because you love me."

And Hugh Macklin knew that she was right.

She stretched her white arms upward, lazily, and said, "I have taken lovers before from the world of men."

She drifted closer on the breath of the sea, and her eyes were merry and full of light.

"Would you like that, Hugh Macklin? To love me, to stay with me always?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes."

He was racked with longing, just to be near her, to watch her move among the crystal towers and listen to the singing music of her voice. Through her, a man might glimpse the wonder of eternal life, of youth and never-ending beauty.

"Take off your helmet, Hugh Macklin. That ugly thing that hides the beauty of the sea. Let the water touch you. Let me touch you, let me kiss your lips and set you free of the land forever."

Her hands, reaching out to him. Her mouth, tender and passionate and laughing—

"Take off your helmet, Hugh Macklin."

He wanted to, he hungered to, but one last memory of fear held him. The remembered picture of the temple walls, covered with paintings of other men who had answered the call of Tiamat.

"What of them?" he asked harshly, above the pounding of his heart. "Were they happy here, the dead who could not really die?"

"Why do you call them that? They had eternal life, until Marduk destroyed them because he was mortal and must die himself. Look around you. Could you be unhappy here?"

No, thought Macklin, not unless one could be unhappy in fairyland.

Tiamat said, "Could you be unhappy here—with me?"

Macklin slowly raised his hands, and began to fumble with the heavy bolts of the helmet.

It was then that Roos and Thorpe came, thrusting their clumsy way between the people of the sea. They had lost their goddess, and they had hunted for her, and now they had found her.

They scrambled toward her across the sand, floundering, their human bodies pitifully unsuited to the task. The huge Dutchman, the lean, hard-bitten Thorpe, men Macklin had known and worked with—but they were men no longer.

They were nothing, not beast nor fish nor anything that lives normally under the sun. They were not even alive. They did not breathe for they had no need of breath, now that their life was only a pseudo-life fanned within them by the magic of an ancient, evil science.

Their faces were the empty patient faces of the dead, and their eyes were without sight or soul or hope.

Until they saw Tiamat.

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THEN it was as though torches had been lighted in a dark cave. They scrambled toward her, dog-like, and fell at her feet and worshiped.

Hugh Macklin said heavily, "Are they, too, your lovers?"

Tiamat's eyes had narrowed as she sensed the sick, cold horror that struck him like a blow. But she only smiled.

"One is ugly, the other old. You are young, Hugh Macklin, and you are not ugly." Her face was lovely, tempting, eager, with lips that would be for him alone.

"Take off your helmet. Stay with me—and love me."

Roos reached out one water-wrinkled, flabby hand and touched her little foot, and ground his forehead in the sand.

Macklin took his hands away from his helmet and gripped the sistrum, and the golden haft of it seemed to burn his hand.

He saw dreadful anger flash into Tiamat's face.

He saw the waiting ranks of her people break into chaos, into movement, into attack.

He felt the fear that was greater than the fear of death run like a wave through the sea, and all the universe was full of rushing silver bodies like a rain of stars.

He felt himself go down under the attack, but still he gripped the sistrum and shook it, and the shock of his fall shook it harder.

More with his soul than with his hearing, Macklin heard the first piercing chiming of the sistrum swell into a terrible, rending sword of sonic vibration.

Sound could daze, sound could stun the nerve-centers. And this awful, poignant sound could stun them into—paralysis.

It seemed to him that all the torrent of living things rushing upon him was instantly shocked and frozen by that dread, piercing note that struck and stunned their more delicate brains. It seemed to him that all the waters and life of earth were stilled.

The awful voice of Marduk's sistrum commanded, and the world obeyed, and Hugh Macklin knelt on the floor of the sea, blinded with tears, as he shook the sceptre made of gold and crystal and living death.

After a time he dropped the sistrum, and he also lay still.

HUGH MACKLIN rose, like an old and broken man, from the floor of the sea. He lifted the sceptre of Marduk from the sand and thrust it into his belt again, and then he raised his eyes and looked at the thing he had done.

The crystal towers stood as they had before, but their domes were cracked and riven by the vibration-voice of the sistrum. The fish had fled before it. And on the sand between the broken towers, the people of Tiamat slept.

In all the city, only two things moved. Roos and Thorpe, whose human mechanism, like Macklin's, was too dull to be paralyzed by the subtle vibration. They crouched like two weeping children on the sand, and watched Tiamat.

Hugh Macklin raised her lovely body in his arms. Her eyes were closed now. No more memories, no more light, no more laughter. All the wonderful swiftness and grace of her body stilled, all the life and the joy. Macklin had ceased to weep. What he felt in his heart was too deep for tears.

He started off, toward the cliff where the shining palace waited. Thorpe and the Dutchman followed. They moaned for Tiamat, and they could not understand.

Hugh Macklin climbed a precarious path up the black cliff to the ledge, bearing the sleeping Tiamat in his arms. He entered the palace.

Upward through the silent gleaming halls, slowly, heavily, sadly. Upward past vaulted chambers where the great golden doors stood open, swinging with the stately breathing of the sea. Upward to the highest tower, and the stillness was deeper than death.

When he entered Tiamat's chamber, he saw that already the fish were coming back, slipping like shadows into the room.

He laid Tiamat on her couch, gently, tenderly, straightening her limbs so that she might be comfortable, stroking the dark hair back from her face. Roos and Thorpe crept to the foot of the couch and knelt there, and Macklin knew that they would stay, beyond the end of the world if need be, waiting for Tiamat to awake.

He leaned over her, wishing that he might kiss her lips, and the slow tears fell and blurred the glass window of his helmet.

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Just at the last she spoke to him, very faintly because her mind was still stunned. She spoke his name, and the singing, crystal sweetness of her voice was far off and infinitely sad.

"You will come back, Hugh Macklin."

Macklin closed his eyes. He said, "I love you, Tiamat. But I will not come back."

He turned and went out of the room. At the door he paused and looked back, once, and saw that again that great coiling creature of the deep had looped itself around the still shape of beauty, and that its head was once more pillowed on her shoulder.

Roos and Thorpe crouched unmoving at Tiamat's feet, and he knew that they would never move from there.

He went away from the palace, down through the crystal city, and still the chiming echo of her voice followed him.

You will come back. You will come back.

He was full of a terrible weakness. The ocean floor was dark, and empty, and very cold.

He knew that the land, when he reached it, would be no better. He knew that he could not bear to live where he could not hear the sea, and yet also that the sound of every breaking wave would break his heart again.

You will come back, Hugh Macklin.

"Perhaps, Tiamat," he whispered. "Perhaps some day I will."

Moon-Marked

By S. OMAR BARKER

CONSIDER Adam, whose widening eyes
Saw the first white full moon rise
Beyond some shadow-fronded crest
Within the Garden of the Blest.

New then the earth and new the moon.
And newer still the rigadoon
Of quickened pulse within the blood
Of First Man in a moonlit wood.

Something beyond all analyzing
Rose in that first full moon's rising;
A something neither good nor bad—
A pulse untamed, and a little mad.

Whether the jungle tom-toms beat,
Or boogie-woogie assails the street,
Or a cowboy sings on a lonely trail,
Moon-marked is the human male.

Consider Adam, who could not rest
In Eden's Garden of the Blest.
Consider Adam, nor judge him ill,
'Witched by a white moon over a hill.

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The Deadly Ratio

BETTER not read it. I mean it. No—this isn't one of those "perhaps it will happen to you" things. It's a lot worse than that. It might very possibly be happening to you right now. And you won't know until it's over. You can't, by the very nature of things.

(I wonder what the population really is?)

On the other hand, maybe it won't make any difference if I do tell you about it. Once you got used to the idea, you might even be able to relax and enjoy it. Heaven knows there's plenty to enjoy—and again I say it—by the very nature of things.

All right, then, if you think you can take it. . . .

I met her in a restaurant. You may know the place—Murphy's. It has a big oval bar and then a partition. On the other side of the partition are small tables, then an aisle, then booths.

Gloria was sitting at one of the small tables. All of the booths but two were empty; all the other small tables but one were unoccupied, so there was plenty of room in the place for me.

But there was only one place I could sit—at her table. That was because, when I saw Gloria, there wasn't anything else in the world. I have never been through anything like that. I just stopped dead. I dropped my briefcase and stared at her. She had gleaming auburn hair and olive skin. She had delicate high-arched nostrils and a carved mouth, lips that were curved above like gull's wings on the down-beat, and full below. Her eyes were as sealed and spice-toned as a hot buttered rum, and as deep as a mountain night.

Without taking my eyes from her face, I groped for a chair and sat opposite her. I'd forgotten everything. Even about being hungry. Helen hadn't, though. Helen was the head waitress and a swell person. She was fortyish and happy. She didn't know my name but used to call me "The Hungry Fella." I never had to order. When I came in she'd fill me a bar-glass full of beer and pile up two orders of that day's Chef's Special on a steak platter. She arrived with the beer, picked up my briefcase, and went for the fodder. I just kept on looking at Gloria, who by this time, was registering considerable amazement, and a little awe. The awe, she told me later, was conceived only at the size of the beer-glass, but I have my doubts about that.

She spoke first. "Taking an inventory?"

She had one of those rare voices which makes noises out of all other sounds. I nodded. Her chin was rounded, with the barest suggestion of a cleft, but the hinges of her jaw were square.

I THINK she was a little flustered. She dropped her eyes—I was glad, because I could see then how very long and thick her lashes were—and poked at her salad. She looked up again, half-smiling. Her teeth met, tip to tip. I'd read about that but had never actually seen it before. "What is it?" she asked. "Have I made a conquest?"

I nodded again. "You certainly have."

"Well!" she breathed.

"Your name's Gloria," I said positively.

"How did you know?"

"It had to be, that's all."

She looked at me carefully, at my eyes, my forehead, my shoulders. "If your name is Leo, I'll scream."

"Scream then. But why?"

"I—I've always thought I'd meet a man named Leo, and—"

Helen canceled the effects of months of good relations between herself and me, by bringing my lunch just then. Gloria's eyes widened when she saw it. "You must be very fond of lobster hollandaise."

"I'm very fond of all subtle things," I said, "and I like them in great masses."

"I've never met anyone like you," she said candidly.

"No one like you ever has."

"Oh?"

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

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BY THEODORE STURGEON

If you've ever fallen in love, if you ever hope to, read on carefully . . .

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I picked up my fork. "Obviously not, or there'd be a race of us." I scooped up some lobster. "Would you be good enough to watch carefully while I eat? I can't seem to stop looking at you, and I'm afraid I might stab my face with the fork."

She chortled. It wasn't a chuckle, or a gurgle. It was a true Lewis Carrol chortle. They're very rare. "I'll watch."

"Thank you. And while you watch, tell me what you don't like."

"What I *don't* like? Why?"

"I'll probably spend the rest of my life finding out the things you do like, and doing them with you. So let's get rid of the non-essentials."

She laughed. "All right. I don't like tapioca because it makes me feel conspicuous, staring that way. I don't like furniture with buttons on the upholstery; lace curtains that cross each other; small flower-prints, hooks-and-eyes and snap fasteners where zippers ought to be; that orchestra leader with the candy saxophones and the yodelling brother; tweedy men who smoke pipes; people who can't look me in the eye when they're lying; night clothes; people who make mixed drinks with Scotch—my, you eat fast."

"I just do it to get rid of my appetite so I can begin eating for esthetic reasons. I like that list."

"What don't *you* like?"

"I don't like literary intellectuals with their conversations all dressed up in over-quotes. I don't like bathing-suits that don't let the sun in and I don't like weather that keeps bathing-suits in. I don't like salty food; clinging-vine girls; music that doesn't go anywhere or build anything; people who have forgotten how to wonder like children; automobiles designed to be better streamlined going backwards than going forward; people who will try anything once but are afraid to try it twice and acquire a taste; and professional sceptics." I went back to my lunch.

"You bat a thousand," she said. "Something remarkable is happening here."

"Let it happen," I cautioned. "Never mind what it is or why. Don't be like the guy who threw a light-bulb on the floor to find out if it was brittle." Helen passed and I ordered a Slivovitz.

"Prune brandy!" cried Gloria. "I love it!"

"I know. It's for you."

"Some day you're going to be wrong," she said, suddenly somber, "and that will be bad."

"That will be good. It'll be the difference between harmony and contrast, that's all."

"Leo—"

"Hm?"

She brought her gaze squarely to me, and it was so warm I could feel it on my face. "Nothing. I was just saying it, Leo. *Leo.*"

Something choked me—not the lobster. It was all gone. "I have no gag for that. I can't top it. I can match it, Gloria."

Another thing was said, but without words.

There are still no words for it. Afterward she reached across and touched my hand with her fingertips. I saw colors.

I got up to go, after scribbling on a piece of the menu. "Here's my phone number. Call me up when there's no other way out."

She raised her eyebrows. "Don't you want my phone, or my address, or anything?"

"No," I said.

"But—"

"This means too much," I said. "I'm sorry if I seem to be dropping it in your lap like this. But any time you are with me, I want it to be because you want to be with me, not because you think it's what I might want. We've got to be together because we are traveling in the same direction at approximately the same speed, each under his own power. If I call you up and make all the arrangements, it could be that I was acting on a conditioned reflex, like any other wolf. If you call, we can both be sure."

"It makes sense." She raised those deep eyes to me. Leaving her was coming up out of those eyes hand over hand. A long haul. I only just made it.

OUT on the street I tried valiantly to get some sense of proportion. The most remarkable thing about the whole remarkable business was simply this: that in all my life before, I had never been able to talk to anyone like that. I had always been diffident, easy-going, unaggressive to a fault, and rather slow on the uptake.

I felt like the daydreams of the much

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advertised 97-pound weakling as he clipped that coupon.

"Hey—you!"

I generally answered to that as well as anything else. I looked up and recoiled violently. There was a human head floating in midair next to me. I was so startled I couldn't even stop walking. The head drifted along beside me, bobbing slightly as if invisible legs carried an invisible body to which the visible head was attached. The face was middle-aged, bookish, dryly humorous.

"You're quite a hell of a fellow, aren't you?"

Oddly, my tongue loosened from the roof of my mouth. "Some pretty nice people think so," I faltered. I looked around nervously, expecting a stampede when other people saw this congenial horror.

"No one can see me but you," said the head. "No one that's likely to make a fuss, at any rate."

"Wh-what do you want?"

"Just wanted to tell you something," said the head. It must have had a throat somewhere because it cleared it. "Parthenogenesis," it said didactically, "has little survival value, even with syzygy. Without it—" The head disappeared. A little lower down, two bony, bare shoulders appeared, shrugged expressively, and vanished. The head reappeared. "—there isn't a chance."

"You don't say," I quavered.

It didn't say. Not any more, just then. It was gone.

I stopped, spun around, looking for it. What it had told me made as little sense to me, then, as its very appearance. It took quite a while for me to discover that it had told me the heart of the thing I'm telling you. I do hope I'm being a little more lucid than the head was.

Anyway, that was the first manifestation of all. By itself, it wasn't enough to make me doubt my sanity. As I said, it was only the first.

I MIGHT as well tell you something about Gloria. Her folks had been poor enough to evaluate good things, well enough off to be able to have a sample or two of these good things. So Gloria could appreciate what was good as well as the effort that was necessary to get it. At twenty-two she was the assistant buyer of a men's department store. (This was toward the end of the war.) She needed some extra money for a pet project, so she sang at a club every night. In her "spare" time she practiced and studied and at the end of a year had her commercial pilot's license. She spent the rest of the war ferrying airplanes.

Do you begin to get the idea of what kind of people she was?

She was one of the most dynamic women who ever lived. She was thoughtful and articulate and completely un-phoney.

She was strong. You can have no idea—no; some of you do know how strong. I had forgotten. . . . She radiated her strength. Her strength surrounded her like a cloud rather than like armor, for she was tangible through it. She influenced everything and everyone she came near. I felt, sometimes, that the pieces of ground which bore her footprints, the chairs she used, the doors she touched and the books she had held, continued to radiate for weeks afterward, like the Bikini ships.

She was completely self-sufficient. I had hit the matter squarely when I insisted that she call me before we saw each other again. Her very presence was a compliment. When she was with me, it was, by definition, because that was where she would rather be than any other place on earth. When she was away from me, it was because to be with me at that time would not have been a perfect thing, and in her way she was a perfectionist.

Oh, yes—a perfectionist. I should know!

You ought to know something about me, too, so that you can realize how completely a thing like this is done, and how it is being done to so many of you.

I'm in my twenties and I play guitar for a living. I've done a lot of things and I carry around a lot of memories from each of them—things that only I could possibly know. The color of the walls in the rooming house where I stayed when I was "on the beach" in Port Arthur, Texas, when the crew of my ship went out on strike. What kind of flowers that girl was wearing the night she jumped off the cruise ship in Montego Bay, down in Jamaica.

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I can remember, hazily, things like my brother's crying because he was afraid of the vacuum cleaner, when he was four. So I couldn't have been quite three then. I can remember fighting with a kid called Boaz, when I was seven. I remember Harriet, whom I kissed under a fragrant tulip poplar one summer dusk when I was twelve. I remember the odd little lick that drummer used to tear off when, and only when he was really riding, while I was playing at the hotel, and the way the trumpet man's eyes used to close when he heard it. I remember the exact smell of the tiger's wagon when I was pulling ropes on the Barnes Circus, and the one-armed roustabout who used to chantey us along when we drove the stakes, he swinging a twelve-pound maul with the rest of us—

"*Hit* down, *slap it* down, *Haul* back, *snub*, bub,

"*Half* back, *quarter* back, *all* back, *whoa!*"

—he used to cry, with the mauls rat-tatting on the steelbound peg and the peg melting into the ground, and the snubber grunting over his taut half-hitch while the six of us stood in a circle around the peg. And those other hammers, in the blacksmith's shop in Puerto Rico, with the youngster swinging a sledge in great full circles, clanging on the anvil, while the old smith touched the work almost delicately with his shaping hammer and then tinkled out every syncopation known to man by bouncing it on the anvil's horn and face between his own strokes and those of the great metronomic sledge. I remember the laboring and servile response of a power shovel under my hands as they shifted from hoist to crowd to swing to rehaul controls, and the tang of burning drum-frictions and hot crater compound. That was at the same quarry where the big Finnish blast foreman was killed by a premature shot. He was out in the open and knew he couldn't get clear. He stood straight and still and let it come, since it was bound to come; and he raised his right hand to his head. My mechanic said he was trying to protect his face but I thought at the time he was saluting something.

Details; that's what I'm trying to get over to you. My head was full of details that were intimately my own.

IT WAS a little over two weeks—sixteen days, three hours, and twenty-three minutes, to be exact—before Gloria called. During that time I nearly lost my mind. I was jealous; I was worried, I was frantic. I cursed myself for not having gotten her number—why, I didn't even know her last name! There were times when I determined to hang up on her if I heard her voice; I was so sore. There were times when I stopped work—I did a lot of arranging for small orchestras—and sat before the silent phone, begging it to ring. I had a routine worked out: I'd demand a statement as to how she felt about me before I let her say another thing. I'd demand an explanation of her silence. I'd act casual and disinterested. I'd—

The phone did ring, though, and it was Gloria, and the dialogue went like so:

"Hello?"

"Leo."

"Yes, Gloria!"

"I'm coming up."

"I'm waiting."

And that was it. I met her at the door. I had never touched her before, except for that one brief contact of hands; and yet, with perfect confidence, with no idea of doing anything different, I took her in my arms and kissed her. This whole thing has its terrible aspects, and yet, sometimes I wonder if moments like that don't justify the horror of it.

I took her hand and led her into the living room. The room wavered like an underwater scene because she was in it. The air tasted different. We sat close together with our hands locked, saying that wordless thing with our eyes. I kissed her again. I didn't ask her anything at all.

She had the smoothest skin that ever was. She had a skin smoother than a bird's throat. It was like satin-finished aluminum, but warm and yielding. It was smooth like Gran' Marnier between your tongue and the roof of your mouth.

We played records—Django Reinhardt and The New Friends of Rhythm, and Bach's *Passacaglia and Fugue* and *Tubby the Tuba*. I showed her the Smith illustrations from *Fantazius Mallare* and my folio of Ed Weston prints. I saw things and heard things in them all that I had never

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known before, though they were things I loved.

Not one of them—not a book, nor a record, nor a picture, was new to her. By some alchemy, she had culled the random flood of esthetic expression that had come her way, and had her choices; and her choices were these things that I loved, but loved in a way exclusively hers, a way in which I could share.

WE TALKED about books and places, ideas and people. In her way, she was something of a mystic. "I believe that there is something behind the old superstitions about calling up demons, and materializations of departed spirits," she said thoughtfully. "But I don't think it was ever done with mumbo-jumbo—witches' brew and pentagrams and toads' skins stuffed with human hair buried at the crossroads on a May midnight, unless these rituals were part of a much larger thing—a purely psychic and un-ghostly force coming from the 'wizard' himself."

"I never thought much about it," I said, stroking her hair. It is the only hair that was not fine that I have ever touched with pleasure. Like everything else about her, it was strong and controlled and glowing. "Have you ever tried anything like that? You're some sort of a sorceress. I know when I'm enchanted, at any rate."

"You're not enchanted," she said gravely. "You're not a thing with magic on it. You're a real magic all by yourself."

"You're a darling," I said. "Mine."

"I'm not!" she answered, in that odd way she had of turning aside fantasy for fact. "I don't belong to you. I belong to *me!*"

I must have looked rather stricken, for she laughed suddenly and kissed my hand. "What belongs to you is only a large part of 'us,'" she explained carefully. "Otherwise you belong to you and I belong to me. Do you see?"

"I think I do," I said slowly. "I said I wanted us to be together because we were both traveling together under our own power. I—didn't know it was going to be so true, that's all."

"Don't try to make it any different, Leo. Don't *ever*. If I started to really belong to you, I wouldn't be *me* any more, and then you wouldn't have anything at all."

"You seem so sure of these hazy things."

"They aren't hazy things! They're important. If it weren't for these things, I'd have to stop seeing you. I—*would* stop seeing you."

I put my arms tight around her. "Don't talk about that," I whispered, more frightened than I have ever been in my life before. "Talk about something else. Finish what you were saying about pentagrams and spirits."

She was still a moment. I think her heart was pounding the way mine was, and I think she was frightened too.

"I spend a lot of time reading and mulling over those things," she said after a quiet time. "I don't know why. I find them fascinating. You know what, Leo? I think too much has been written about manifestations of evil. I think it's true that good is more powerful than evil. And I think that far too much has been written and said about ghosties an' ghoulies an' things that go 'boomp' i' th' nicht, as the old Scottish prayer has it. I think those things have been too underlined. They're remarkable enough, but have you ever realized that things that are remarkable are, by definition, rare?"

"If the cloven-hoofed horrors and the wailing banshees are remarkable—which they are—then what's commonplace?"

She spread her hands—square, quite large hands, capable and beautifully kept. "The manifestations of good, of course. I believe that they're much easier to call up. I believe they happen all the time. An evil mind has to be very evil before it can project itself into a new thing with a life of its own. From all accounts I have read, it takes a tremendously powerful mind to call up even a little demon. Good things must be much easier to materialize, because they fall in the pattern of good living. More people live good lives than such thoroughly bad ones that they can materialize evil things."

"Well then, why don't more people bring more good things from behind this mystic curtain?"

"But they do!" she cried. "They must! The world is so full of good things! Why

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do you suppose they're so good? What put the innate goodness into Bach and the Victoria Falls and the color of your hair and Negro laughter and the way ginger ale tickles your nostrils?"

I shook my head slowly. "I think that's lovely, and I don't like it."

"Why not?"

I looked at her. She was wearing a wine-colored suit and a marigold silken kerchief tucked into the throat. It reflected on the warm olive of her chin. It reminded me of my grandmother's saying, when I was very small, "Let's see if you like butter," as she held a buttercup under my chin to see how much yellow it reflected. "You are good," I said slowly, searching hard for the words. "You are about the—the goodest thing that ever happened. If what you say is really true, then you might be just a shadow, a dream, a glorious thought that someone had."

"Oh, you idiot," she said, with sudden tears in her eyes. "You big, beautiful hunk of idiot!" She pressed me close and bit my cheek so hard that I yelped. "Is that real?"

"If it isn't," I said, shaken, "I'll be happy to go on dreaming."

SHE stayed another hour—as if there were such a thing as time when we were together—and then she left. I had her phone number by then. A hotel. And after she was gone, I wandered around my apartment, looking at the small wrinkles in the couch-cover where she had sat, touching the cup she had held, staring at the bland black surface of a record, marvelling at the way its grooves had unwound the *Passacaglia* for her. Most wonderful of all was a special way I discovered to turn my head as I moved. Her fragrance clung to my cheek, and if I turned my face just so, I could sense it. I thought about every one of those many minutes with her, each by itself, and the things we had done. I thought, too, about the things we had not done—I know you wondered—and I gloried in them. For, without a word spoken, we had agreed that a thing worth having was a thing worth awaiting and that where faith is complete, exploration is uncalled for.

She came back next day, and the day after. The first of these two visits was wonderful. We sang, mostly. I seemed to know all her very favorite songs. And by a happy accident, my pet key on the guitar—B flat—was exactly within her lovely contralto range. Though I say it as shouldn't, I played some marvellous guitar behind and around what she sang. We laughed a lot, largely at things that were secret between us—is there a love anywhere without its own new language?—and we talked for a long time about a book called "The Fountainhead" which seemed to have had the same extraordinary effect on her that it had on me; but then, it's an extraordinary book.

It was after she left that day that the strangeness began—the strangeness that turned into such utter horror. She hadn't been gone more than an hour when I heard the frightened scramble of tiny claws in the front room. I was poring over the string-bass part of a trio arrangement I was doing (and not seeing it for my Gloria-flavored thoughts) and I raised my head and listened. It was the most panic-struck scurrying imaginable, as if a regiment of newts and salamanders had broken ranks in a wild retreat. I remember clearly that the little-claw susurrus did not disturb me at all, but the terror behind the movement startled me in ways that were not pleasant.

What were they running from? was infinitely more important than *What were they?*

SLOWLY I put down the manuscript and stood up. I went to the wall and along it to the archway, not so much to keep out of sight as to surprise the *thing* that had so terrorized the possessors of those small frightened feet.

And that was the first time I have ever been able to smile while the hackles on the back of my neck were one great crawling prickle. For there was nothing there at all; nothing to glow in the dark before I switched on the overhead light, nothing to show afterward. But the little feet scurried away faster—there must have been hundreds of them—tapping and scrabbling out a perfect crescendo of horrified escape. That was what made my hackles rise. What made me smile—

The sounds radiated from *my* feet!

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I stood there in the archway, my eyeballs throbbing with the effort to see this invisible rout; and from the threshold, to right and left and away into the far corners of the front room, ran the sounds of the little paws and tiny scratching claws. It was as if they were being generated under my soles, and then fleeing madly. None ran behind me. There seemed to be something keeping them from the living room. I took a cautious step further into the front room, and now they did run behind me, but only as far as the archway. I could hear them reach it and scuttle off to the side walls. You see what made me smile?

I was the horror that frightened them so!

The sound gradually lessened. It was not that it lessened in overall intensity. It was just that there were fewer and fewer creatures running away. It diminished rapidly, and in about ninety seconds it had reduced to an occasional single scampering. One invisible creature ran around and around me, as if all the unseen holes in the walls had been stopped up and it was frantically looking for one. It found one, too, and was gone.

I laughed then and went back to my work. I remember that I thought quite clearly after that, for a while. I remember writing in a *glissando* passage that was a stroke of genius—something to drive the dog-house slapper crazy but guaranteed to drive the customers even crazier if it could be done at all. I remember zoom-zooming it off under my breath, and feeling mightily pleased with myself over it.

And then the reaction struck me.

Those little claws—

What was happening to me?

I thought instantly of Gloria. *There's some deadly law of compensation working here,* I thought. For every yellow light, a purple shadow. For every peal of laughter, a cry of anguish somewhere. For the bliss of Gloria, a touch of horror to even things up.

I licked my lips, for they were wet and my tongue was dry.

What was happening to me?

I thought again of Gloria, and the colors and sounds of Gloria, and most of all, the reality, the solid normalcy of Gloria, for all her exquisite sense of fantasy.

I couldn't go crazy. I *couldn't!* Not *now!* I'd be—unfit.

Unfit! As terrifying to me, then, as the old cry of *"Unclean"* was in the Middle Ages.

"Gloria, darling," I'd have to say, *"Honey, we'll just have to call it quits. You see, I'm off my trolley. Oh, I'm quite serious. Yes indeedy. The men in the white coats will come around and back up their little wagon to the door and take me away to the laughing academy. And we won't see each other any more. A pity. A great pity. Just give me a hearty little old handshake, now, and go find yourself another fellow."*

"Gloria!" I yelled. Gloria was all those colors, and the lovely sounds, and the fragrance that clung to my cheek and came to me when I moved and held my head just so.

"Oh, I dunno," I moaned. "I just don't know what to do! What is it? What is it?"

"Syzygy."

"Huh?" I came bolt upright, staring around wildly. Twenty inches over the couch hovered the seamed face of my jovial phantom of the street outside Murphy's. "You! Now I know I'm off my—hey! What is syzygy?"

"What's happening to you."

"Well, what is happening to me?"

"Syzygy." The head grinned engagingly. I put my head in my hands. There is an emotional pitch—an *un*emotional pitch, really—at which nothing is surprising, and I'd reached it. "Please explain," I said dully. "Tell me who you are, and what you mean by this sizz-sizz whatever-it-is."

"I'm not anybody," said the head, "and syzygy is a concomitant of parthenogenetic and certain other low types. I think what's happening *is* syzygy. If it isn't—" The head disappeared, a hand with spatulate fingers appeared and snapped its fingers explosively; the hand disappeared, the head reappeared and smiled, "—you're a gone goose."

"Don't *do* that," I said miserably.

"Don't do what?"

"That—that piecemeal business. Why do you do it?"

"Oh—that. Conservation of energy. It works here too, you know."

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"Where is 'here'?"

"That's a little difficult to explain until you get the knack of it. It's the place where reverse ratios exist. I mean, if something stacks up in a three to five ratio there, it's a five to three ratio here. Forces must balance."

I almost had it. What he said almost made sense. I opened my mouth to question him but he was gone.

After that I just sat there. Perhaps I wept.

AND Gloria came the next day, too. That was bad. I did two wrong things. First, I kept information from her, which was inexcusable. If you are going to share at all, you must share the bad things too. The other thing I did was to question her like a jealous adolescent.

But what else could be expected? Everything was changed. Everything was different. I opened the door to her and she brushed past me with a smile, and not a very warm one at that, leaving me at the door all outstretched arms and large clumsy feet.

She shrugged out of her coat and curled up on the couch.

"Leo, play some music."

I felt like hell and I know I looked it. Did she notice? Did she even care? Didn't it make any difference at all how I felt, what I was going through?

I went and stood in front of her. "Gloria," I said sternly, "Where have you been?"

She looked up at me and released a small, retrospective sigh that turned me bright green and sent horns sprouting out of my scalp. It was such a happy, satisfied little sound. I stood there glowering at her. She waited a moment more and then got up, switched on the amplifier and turntable, dug out the "Dance of the Hours," turned the volume up, added too much bass, and switched in the volume expander, which is quite the wrong thing to use on that record. I strode across the room and turned the volume down.

"Please, Leo," she said in a hurt tone. "I like it that way."

Viciously I turned it back up and sat down with my elbows on my knees and my lower lip stuck out. I was wild. This was all wrong.

I know what I should do, I thought sullenly. *I ought to yank the plug on the rig and stand up and tell her off.*

How right I was! But I didn't do it. How could I do it? This was *Gloria!* Even when I looked up at her and saw her staring at me, saw the slight curl to her lip, I didn't do it. Well, it was too late then. She was watching me, comparing me with—

Yes, that was it. She was comparing me with somebody. Somebody who was different from her, someone who rode roughshod over everything delicate and subtle about her, everything about her that I liked and shared with her. And she, of course, ate it up.

I took refuge in the tactic of letting her make the first move. I think, then, that she despised me. And rightly.

A bit of cockney dialogue I had once heard danced through my mind:

"D'ye love us, Alf?"

"Yus."

"Well, knock us abaht a bit."

You see? I knew the right things to do, but—

But this was Gloria. I *couldn't.*

THE record finished, and she let the automatic shut off the turntable. I think she expected me to turn it over. I didn't. She said, "All right, Leo. What is it?" tiredly.

I said to myself, "I'll start with the worst possible thing that could happen. She'll deny that, and then at least I'll feel better." So I said to her, "You've changed. There's somebody else."

She looked up at the picture molding and smiled sleepily. "Yes," she said. "There certainly is."

"Uff!" I said, because that caught me right in the solar plexus. I sat down abruptly.

"His name's Arthur," she said dreamily. "He's a real man, Leo."

"Oh," I said bitterly. "I can see it. Five o'clock shadow and a head full of white matter. A toupée on his chest and a vernacular like a boatswain. Too much shoulders, too little hips, and, to quote Thorne Smith, a voice as low as his intentions. A man who never learned the distinction be-

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tween eating and dining, whose idea of a hot time consists of—"

"Stop it," she said. She said it quite casually and very quietly. Because my voice was raised, it contrasted enough to have a positively deafening effect. I stood there with my jaw swinging like the lower gate of a steam-shovel as she went on, "Don't be catty, Leo."

It was a studied insult for her to use such a woman-to-woman phrase, and we both knew it. I was suddenly filled with what the French call *ésprit d' éscalier*—the wit of the staircase; in other words, the belated knowledge of the thing you should have said if you'd only thought of it in time, which you mumble frustratedly to yourself as you go down the stairs on your way out. I should have caught her to me as she tried to brush past me when she arrived, smothered her with—what was that corny line? "kisses—hard, toothraking kisses, that broke his lips and hers in exquisite, salty pain." Then I should have threatened her with pinking scissors—

And then I thought of the glittering, balanced structure of self-denial I had built with her, and I could have cried. . . .

"Why come here and parade it in front of me?" I shouted. "Why don't you take your human bulldozer and cross a couple of horizons with him? Why come here and rub my nose in it?"

SHE stood up, pale, and lovelier than I had thought a human being could be—so beautiful that I had to close my eyes. "I came because I had to have something to compare him with," she said steadily. "You are everything I have ever dreamed about, Leo, and my dreams are . . . very detailed. . . ." At last she faltered, and her eyes were bright. "Arthur is—is—" She shook her head. Her voice left her; she had to whisper. "I know everything about you, Leo. I know how you think, and what you will say, and what you like, and it's wonderful, wonderful . . . but Leo, Arthur is something outside of me. Don't you see? Can't you see? I don't always like what Arthur does. *But I can't tell what he's going to do!* You—you share everything, Leo, Leo darling, but you don't—*take* anything!"

"Oh," I said hoarsely. My scalp was tight. I got up and started across the room toward her. My jaws hurt.

"Stop, Leo," she gasped. "Stop it, now. You can do it, but you'll be acting. You've never acted before. It would be wrong. Don't spoil what's left. No, Leo—no . . . no . . ."

She was right. She was so right. She was always right about me; she knew me so well. This kind of melodrama was away out of character for me. I reached her. I took her arm and she closed her eyes. It hurt when my fingers closed on her arm. She trembled but she did not try to pull away. I got her wrist and lifted it. I turned her hand over and put a kiss on the palm. Then I closed her fingers on it. "Keep that," I said. "You might like to have it some time." Then I let her go.

"Oh Leo, darling," she said. "Darling," she said, with a curl to her lip. . . .

She turned to go. And then—

"Arhgh!" She uttered a piercing scream and turned back to me, all but bowling me over in her haste to get away from Abernathy. I stood there holding her tight while she pressed, crouched, squeezed against me, and I burst into laughter. Maybe it was reaction—I don't know. But I roared.

Abernathy is my mouse.

Our acquaintance began shortly after I took the apartment. I knew the little son-of-a-gun was there because I found evidences of his depredations under the sink where I stored my potatoes and vegetables. So I went out and got a trap. In those days the kind of trap I wanted was hard to find; it took me four days and a young fortune in carfare to run one of them down. You see, I can't abide the kind of trap that hurls a wire bar down on whatever part of the mouse happens to be available, so that the poor shrieking thing dies in agony. I wanted—and by heaven, I got—one of those wire-basket effects made so that a touch on the bait trips a spring which slams a door on the occupant.

I caught Abernathy in the contraption the very first night. He was a small gray mouse with very round ears. They were like the finest tissue, and covered with the softest fuzz in the world. They were translucent, and if you looked very closely you could see the most meticulous arrangement

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of hairline blood-vessels in them. I shall always maintain that Abernathy owed his success in life to the beauty of his ears. No one with pretensions to a soul could destroy such divine tracery.

Well, I let him alone until he got over being frightened and frantic, until he got hungry and ate all the bait, and a few hours over. When I thought he was good and ready to listen to reason, I put the trap on my desk and gave him a really good talking-to.

I explained very carefully (in simple language, of course) that for him to gnaw and befoul in his haphazard fashion was downright antisocial. I explained to him that when I was a child I was trained to finish whatever I started to eat, and that I did it to this day, and I was a human being and much bigger and stronger and smarter than he was. And whatever was good enough for me was at least good enough for him to take a crack at. I really laid down the law to that mouse. I let him mull over it for a while and then I pushed cheese through the bars until his tummy was round like a ping-pong ball. Then I let him go.

THERE was no sign of Abernathy for a couple of days after that. Then I caught him again; but since he had stolen nothing I let him off with a word of warning—very friendly this time; I had been quite stern at first, of course—and some more cheese. Inside of a week I was catching him every other night, and the only trouble I ever had with him was one time when I baited the trap and left it closed. He couldn't get in to the cheese and he just raised Cain until I woke up and let him in. After that I knew good relations had been established and I did without the trap and just left cheese out for him. At first he wouldn't take the cheese unless it was in the trap, but he got so he trusted me and would take it lying out on the floor. I had long since warned him about the poisoned food that the neighbors might leave out for him, and I think he was properly scared. Anyhow, we got along famously.

So here was Gloria, absolutely petrified, and in the middle of the floor in the front room was Abernathy, twinkling his nose and rubbing his hands together. In the middle of my bellow of laughter, I had a severe qualm of conscience. Abernathy had had no cheese since the day before yesterday! *Sic semper amoris.* I had been fretting so much over Gloria that I had overlooked my responsibilities.

"Darling, I'll take care of him," I said reassuringly to Gloria. I led her to an easy-chair and went after Abernathy. I have a noise I make by pressing my tongue against my front teeth—a sort of a squishy-squeaky noise, which I always made when I gave cheese to Abernathy. He ran right over toward me, saw Gloria, hesitated, gave a "the hell with it" flirt with his tail, turned to me and ran up my pants-leg.

The outside, fortunately.

Then he hugged himself tight into my palm while I rummaged in the icebox with my other hand for his cheese. He didn't snatch at it, either, until he let me look at his ears again. You never saw such beautiful ears in your life. I gave him the cheese, and broke off another piece for his dessert, and set him in the corner by the sink. Then I went back to Gloria, who had been watching me, big-eyed and trembling.

"Leo—how can you *touch* it?"

"Makes nice touching. Didn't you ever touch a mouse?"

She shuddered, looking at me as if I were Horatio just back from the bridge. "I can't stand them."

"Mice? Don't tell me that you, of all people, really and truly have the traditional Victorian mouse phobia!"

"Don't laugh at me," she said weakly. "It isn't only mice. It's any little animal—frogs and lizards and even kittens and puppies. I like big dogs and cats and horses. But somehow—" She trembled again. "If I hear anything like little claws running across the floor, or see small things scuttling around the walls, it drives me crazy."

I goggled. "If you hear—hey; it's a good thing you didn't stay another hour last night, then."

"Last night?" Then, "Last night. . . ." she said, in a totally different voice, with her eyes looking inward and happy. She chuckled. "I was telling—Arthur about that little phobia of mine last night."

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If I had thought my masterful handling of the mouse was going to do any good, apparently I was mistaken. "You better shove off," I said bitterly. "Arthur might be waiting."

"Yes," she said, without any particular annoyance, "he might. Goodbye, Leo."

"Goodbye."

Nobody said anything for a time.

"Well," she said, "Goodbye."

"Yes," I said, "I'll call you."

"Do that," she said, and went out.

I SAT still on the couch for a long time, trying to get used to it. Wishful thinking was no good; I knew that. Something had happened between us. Mostly, its name was Arthur. The thing I couldn't understand was how he ever got a show, the way things were between Gloria and me. In all my life, in all my reading, I had never heard of such a complete fusion of individuals. We both felt it when we met; it had had no chance to get old. Arthur was up against some phenomenal competition; for one thing that was certain was that Gloria reciprocated my feelings perfectly, and one of my feelings was faith. I could understand—if I tried hard—how another man might overcome this hold, or that hold, which I had on her. There are smarter men than I, better looking ones, stronger ones. Any of several of those items could go by the board, and leave us untouched.

But not the faith! Not that! It was too big; nothing else we had was important enough to compensate for a loss of faith.

I got up to turn on the light, and slipped. The floor was wet. Not only was it wet; it was soft. I floundered to the seven-way lamp and cranked both switches all the way around.

The room was covered with tapioca. Ankle-deep on the floor, inches deep on the chairs and the couch.

"She's thinking about it now," said the head. Only it wasn't a head this time. It was a flaccid mass of folded tissue. In it I could see pulsing blood vessels. My stomach squirmed.

"Sorry. I'm out of focus." The disgusting thing—a sectioned brain, apparently—moved closer to me and became a face.

I lifted a foot out of the gummy mass, shook it, and put it back in again. "I'm glad she's gone," I said hoarsely.

"Are you afraid of the stuff?"

"No!" I said. "Of course not!"

"It will go away," said the head. "Listen; I'm sorry to tell you; it isn't syzygy. You're done, son."

"What isn't syzygy?" I demanded. "And what is syzygy?"

"Arthur. The whole business with Arthur."

"Go away," I gritted. "Talk sense, or go away. Preferably—go away."

The head shook from side to side, and its expression was gentle. "Give up," it said. "Call it quits. Remember what was good, and fade out."

"You're no good to me," I muttered, and waded over to the book case. I got out a dictionary, glowering at the head, which now was registering a mixture of pity and amusement.

Abruptly, the tapioca disappeared.

I leafed through the book. Sizable, sizar, size, sizzle— "Try S-Y," prompted the head.

I glared at it and went over to the S-Y's. Systemize, systole—

"Here it is," I said, triumphantly. "The last word in the S section." I read from the book. " 'Syzygy—either of the points at which the moon is most nearly in line with the earth and the sun, as when it is new or full'. What are you trying to tell me—that I'm caught in the middle of some astrological mumbo-jumbo?"

"Certainly not," it snapped. "I will tell you, however, that if that's all your dictionary says, it's not a very good one." It vanished.

"But—" I said vaguely. I went back to the dictionary. That's all it had to say about syzygy. Shaking, I replaced it.

SOMETHING cat-sized and furry hurtled through the air, clawed at my shoulder. I started, backed into my record cabinet and landed with a crash on the middle of my back in the doorway. The thing leaped from me to the couch and sat up, curling a long wide tail up against its back and regarding me with its jewelled eyes. A squirrel.

"Well, hello!" I said, getting to my

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knees and then to my feet. "Where on earth did you come from?"

The squirrel, with the instantaneous motion of its kind, dived to the edge of the couch and froze with its four legs wide apart, head up, tail describing exactly its recent trajectory, and ready to take off instantly in any direction including up. I looked at it with some puzzlement. "I'll go see if I have any walnuts," I told it. I moved toward the archway, and as I did so the squirrel leaped at me. I threw up a hand to protect my face. The squirrel struck my shoulder again and leaped from it—

And as far as I know it leaped into the fourth dimension or somewhere. For I searched under and into every bed, chair, closet, cupboard and shelf in the house, and could find no sign of anything that even looked like a squirrel. It was gone as completely as the masses of tapioca. . . .

Tapioca! What had the head said about the tapioca? "She's thinking about it now." *She*—Gloria, of course. This whole insane business was tied up with Gloria in some way.

Gloria not only disliked tapioca—she was afraid of it.

I CHEWED on that for a while, and then looked at the clock. Gloria had had time enough to get to the hotel. I ran to the phone, dialled.

"Hotel San Dragon," said a chewing-gum voice.

"748, please," I said urgently.

A couple of clicks. Then, "Hello?"

"Gloria," I said. "Listen; I—"

"Oh, you. Listen—can you call me back later? I'm very busy."

"I can and I will, but tell me something quickly: Are you afraid of squirrels?"

Don't tell me a shudder can't be transmitted over a telephone wire. One was that time. "I hate them. Call me back in about—"

"Why do you hate them?"

With exaggerated patience, she said carefully, "When I was a little girl, I was feeding some pigeons and a squirrel jumped right up on my shoulder and scared me half to death. Now, *please*—"

"Okay, okay," I said. "I'll speak to you later." I hung up. She shouldn't talk to me that way. She had no right—

What was she doing in that hotel room, anyway?

I pushed the ugly thought down out of sight, and went and poured myself a beer. Gloria is afraid of tapioca, I thought, and tapioca shows up here. She is afraid of the sound of small animals' feet, and I hear them here. She is afraid of squirrels that jump on people, and I get a squirrel that jumps on people.

That must all make some sense. Of course, I could take the easy way out, and admit that I was crazy. But somehow, I was no longer so ready to admit anything like that. Down deep inside, I made an agreement with myself not to admit that until I had exhausted every other possibility.

A very foolish piece of business. See to it that you don't do likewise. It's probably much smarter not to try to figure things out.

There was only one person who could straighten this whole crazy mess out—since the head wouldn't—and that was Gloria, I thought suddenly. I realized, then, why I had not called all bets before now. I had been afraid to jeopardize the thing that Gloria and I shared. Well, let's face it. We didn't share it any longer. That admission helped.

I strode to the telephone, and dialled the hotel.

"Hotel San Dragon."

"748 please."

A moment's silence. Then, "I'm sorry, sir. The party does not wish to be disturbed."

I STOOD there looking blankly at the phone, while pain swirled and spiralled up inside me. I think that up to this moment I had treated the whole thing as part sickness, part dream; this, somehow, brought it to a sharp and agonizing focus. Nothing that she could have done could have been so calculated and so cruel.

I cradled the receiver and headed for the door. Before I could reach it, gray mists closed about me. For a moment I seemed to be on some sort of a treadmill; I was walking, but I could not reach any-

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thing. Swiftly, then, everything was normal.

"I must be in a pretty bad way," I muttered. I shook my head. It was incredible. I felt all right, though a little dizzy. I went to the door and out.

The trip to the hotel was the worst kind of a nightmare. I could only conclude that there was something strange and serious wrong with me, completely aside from my fury and my hurt at Gloria. I kept running into these blind spells, when everything about me took on an unreal aspect. The light didn't seem right. I passed people on the street who weren't there when I turned to look at them. I heard voices where there were no people, and I saw people talking but couldn't hear them. I overcame a powerful impulse to go back home. I couldn't go back; I knew it; I knew I had to face whatever crazy thing was happening, and that Gloria had something to do with it.

I CAUGHT a cab at last, though I'll swear one of them disappeared just as I was about to step into it. Must have been another of those blind spells. After that it was easier. I slouched quivering in a corner of the seat with my eyes closed.

I paid off the driver at the hotel and stumbled in through the revolving doors. The hotel seemed much more solid than anything else since this horrible business had started to happen to me. I started over to the desk, determined to give some mad life-and-death message to the clerk to break that torturing "do not disturb" order. I glanced into the coffee room as I passed it and stopped dead.

She was in there, in a booth, with—with someone else. I couldn't see anything of the man but a glossy black head of hair and a thick, ruddy neck. She was smiling at him, the smile that I thought had been born and raised for me.

I stalked over to them, trembling. As I reached them, he half-rose, leaned across the table, and kissed her.

"Arthur . . ." she breathed.

"That," I said firmly, "will do."

They did not move.

"Stop it!" I screamed. They did not move. Nothing moved, anywhere. It was a tableau, a picture, a hellish frozen thing put there to tear me apart.

"That's all," said a now familiar voice, gently. "That kiss did it, son. You're through." It was the head, but now he was a whole man. An ordinary-looking, middle-sized creature he was, with a scrawny frame to match his unimpressive middle-aged face. He perched on the edge of the table, mercifully between me and that torturing kiss.

I ran to him, grasped his thin shoulders. "Tell me what it is," I begged him. "Tell me, if you know—and I think you know. Tell me!" I roared, sinking my fingers into his flesh.

HE PUT his hands up and laid them gently on my wrists, holding them there until I quieted down a little. I let him go. "I *am* sorry, son," he said. "I hoped you would figure it all out by yourself."

"I tried," I said. I looked around me. The grayness was closing in again, and through it I could see the still figure of the people in the coffee-shop, all stopped in mid-action. It was one three-dimensional frame of some unthinkable movie-film. I felt cold sweat all but squirt from the pores of my face. "Where am I?" I shrieked.

"Please," he soothed. "Take it easy, and I'll tell you. Come over here and sit down and relax. Close your eyes and don't try to think. Just listen."

I did as he asked, and gradually I stopped shaking. He waited until he felt that I was calm, and then began talking.

"There is a world of psychic things—call them living thought, call them dreams if you like. Now, you know that of all animals, only human beings can reach these psychic things. It was a biological accident. There is something about humans which is tangent to this psychic world. Humans have the power to open a gate between the two worlds. They can seldom control the power; often they're not aware of it. But when that gate is opened, something materializes in the world of the humans. Imagination itself is enough to do it. If you are hungry, down deep inside, for a certain kind of woman, and if you picture her to yourself vividly enough, such a gate might

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open, and there she'll be. You can see her and touch her; she'll be little different from a real one."

"But—there is a difference?"

"Yes, there is. She is not a separate thing from you. She is a part of you. She is your product. That's what I was driving at when I mentioned parthenogenesis. It works like that."

"Parthenogenesis—let's see. That's the process of reproducing without fertilization, isn't it?"

"That's right. This 'materialization' of yours is a perfect parallel to that. As I told you before, however, it is not a process with high survival value. For one thing, it affords no chance to cross strains. Unless a living creature can bring into itself other characteristics, it must die out."

"Then why don't all parthenogenetic creatures die out?"

"There is a process used by the very simple, one-celled forms of life take care of that. Mind you," he broke off suddenly, "I'm just using all of this biological talk as symbolism. There are basic laws that work in both worlds, that work equally on the high forms of life and the low. Do you see?"

"I see. These are just examples. But go on about this process that the parthenogenetic creatures use to mix their strains."

"It's very simple. Two of these organisms let their nuclei flow together for a time. Then they separate and go their ways again. It isn't a reproductive process at all. It's merely a way in which each may gain a part of the other. It's called—syzygy."

"Oh," I said. "That. But I still don't—let me see. You mentioned it first when that—that——"

"When Gloria met Arthur," the man finished smoothly. "I said that if it were syzygy, you'd be all right. Well, it wasn't, as you saw for yourself. The outside strain, even though it didn't suit her as well as you did, was too strong. You got hurt. Well, in the workings of really basic laws, something always gets hurt."

"What about you? Who are you?"

"I am somebody who has been through it, that's all. You must understand that my world is different from the one you remember. Time itself is different. Though I started from a time perhaps thirty years away, I was able to open a gate near you. Just a little one, of course. I did it so that I could try to make you think this thing out in time. I believed that if you could, you would have been spared all this. You might even have been able to keep Gloria."

"What's it to you?"

"You don't know, do you? You really don't know?"

I opened my eyes and looked at him, and shook my head. "No, I don't. I—like you, old man."

He chuckled. "That's odd, you know. I don't like me."

I CRANED around and looked over at Gloria and her man, still frozen in that strange kiss. "Will those dream-people stay like that forever?"

"Dream people?"

"I suppose that's what they are. You know, I'm a little proud of Gloria. How I managed to dream up anything so—so lovely, I'll never know. I—hey—what's the matter?"

"Didn't you understand what I was telling you? Gloria is real. Gloria goes on living. What you see over there is the thing that happened when you were no longer a part of her. Leo: she dreamed *you!*"

I rose to my feet and put my fists on the table between us. "That's a lie," I choked. "I'm—I'm me, damn you!"

"You're a detailed dream, Leo, and a splendid job. You're a piece of sentient psyche from another world injection-molded into an ideal that Gloria dreamed. Don't try to be anything else. There aren't many real humans, Leo. Most of the world is populated by the dreams of a few of them; didn't you know, Leo? Why do you suppose that so few of the people you met knew anything about the world as a whole? Why do you suppose that humans keep their interests confined and their environments small? Most of them aren't humans at all, Leo!"

"I'm *me,*" I said stubbornly. "Gloria *couldn't* have thought of all of me! Gloria can't run a power shovel! Gloria can't play a guitar! Gloria doesn't know anything about the circus foreman who sang, or the Finn dynamite boss who was killed!"

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"Of course not. Gloria only dreamed a kind of man who was the product of those things, or things like them. Have you run a shovel since you met her? You'd find that you couldn't, if you really tried. You've played guitar for no one but her since you met her. You've spent all your time arranging music that no one will ever see or play!"

"I'm *not* anybody's dream!" I shouted. "I'm not! If I was an ideal of hers, we would have stayed together. I failed with her, old man; don't you know that? She wanted me to be aggressive, and I wasn't."

He looked at me so sadly that I thought he was going to cry. "She wanted you to *take*. You were a part of her; no human can take from himself."

"She was deathly afraid of some things that didn't bother me at all. What about that?"

"The squirrels, and the sound of all the little feet? No, Leo; they were baseless phobias, and she had the power to overcome any of them. She never tried, but it was not difficult to create you without them."

I stared at him. "Do you mean to—Old man, are there more like me, really?"

"Many, many," he sighed. "But few who cling to their nonexistent, ghostly egos as you are doing."

"Do the real people know what they are doing?"

"Very few of them. Very few. The world is full of people who feel incomplete, people who have everything they can possibly want and yet are unhappy, people who feel alone in a crowd. The world is mostly peopled by ghosts."

"But—the war! Roman history! The new car models! What about them?"

He shook his head again. "Some of it's real, some not. It depends on what the real humans want from moment to moment."

I thought a minute, bitterly. Then I asked him "What was that you said about coming back in world-time, and looking through a little gateway at things that had happened?"

He sighed. "If you *must* hang on to the ego she gave you," he said wearily, "you'll stay the way you are now. But you'll age. It will take you the equivalent of thirty or so years to find your way around in that strange psychic world, for you will have to move and think like a human. Why do you want to do that?"

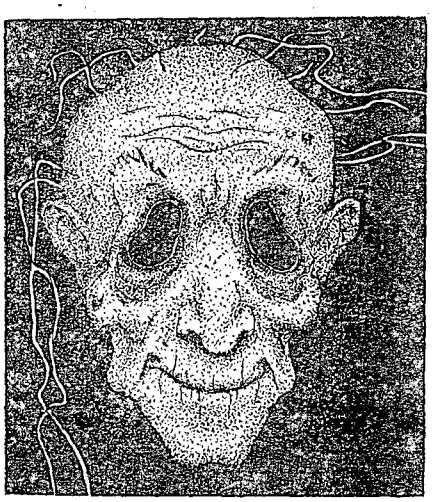
I said, with determination, "I am going back, then, if it takes me a century. I'm going to find me right after I met Gloria, and I'm going to warn me in such a way that I'll figure out a way to be with Gloria for the rest of her life."

He put his hands on my shoulders, and now there really were tears in his eyes. "Oh, you poor, poor kid," he said.

I stared at him. Then, "What's—your name, old man?"

"My name is Leo."

"Oh," I said. "Oh."



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And Give Us Yesterday

BY SEABURY QUINN

FOR the tenth time Angela picked up the letter from the Quartermaster General with Form 345, Military, enclosed, the four options she might exercise: have him left near the beach where he fell, have him brought back for interment in a private cemetery, have him shipped to some foreign country, or sent back for burial in Arlington. She wanted none of them. She wanted her boy back, her Harold with his neat brown hair that waved a little just above the temples, steady hazel eyes and ready smile that lifted slightly more to the left than the right.

Three years ago when she received the formal notice from the War Department with its facsimile of the Adjutant General's signature she had felt betrayed, desolate, all her high hopes crumbled into fragments at her feet. She hadn't fainted, hadn't cried, but she had bitten her lips till the salty taste of blood was in her mouth as she sat with her hands demurely folded in her lap, all feeling gone from her eyes. She wanted desperately to cry, but there were no tears. She wanted desperately to pray, but couldn't; God seemed somehow terribly unreal. Then, with a feeling all her insides were becoming unfastened—and not the faintest notion what she could do about it—she walked slowly to his bedroom with the Japanese prints on the walls, the scarf of brown-blocked Java linen for a counterpane and her and Darcy's photographs on the dresser. She drew back the door of the closet where his suits draped in orderly array on hangers, tweeds, flannels, worsteds, dress and dinner kits, brown shoes and

Is a fallen loved one not better left among the honored dead?

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

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black on wooden trees set toe to toe, hats neatly brushed and put away in pasteboard boxes. A little whiff of peat from Harris tweeds and Shetland weaves came to her, and the faint, elusive scent of lavender and Russia leather and tobacco—odors redolent of him as carnation or violet may be of a beloved woman—and, scarce knowing what she did, she drew the sleeve of a camel's hair topcoat round her shoulders, sank her cheek in its soft, silky fleece. "Harold," she murmured, her voice muffled by the yielding cloth. "Oh, my boy; my boy!" Then she let her breath out slowly, with an odd jerk in it, as if she had not breathed for a long time and needed practice to pick up the way of it again.

Since that day nothing seemed to matter. "Thank you, thank you, very much," she had told the minister, "Thank you," to the kind old ladies of the congregation, "Thank you," to the laundryman and grocer and the men who came to read the electric and gas meters, and the tone with which she voiced her thanks was flat, expressionless, almost mechanical. The War Department's citation and the Purple Heart had no more impact on her numbed senses than a fresh blow on a punch-drunk boxer. She ignored the stilted, sloppily typed communications from the Veteran's Administration. What need had she to ask insurance payments or pension? With health, sufficient money, more beauty than a woman in her middle forties had a right to dare hope for, she already had everything—and nothing.

Now, after three years came this latest message from the War Department and her heart that she had thought wrung dry of sorrow refilled itself from memories. She laid the papers down, her slim white fingers smoothing them almost caressingly, and tears slipped in big jewel-bright drops down her cheeks. She didn't sob, not so much as a sigh escaped her; she just sat there in the big twilit room, her face like ivory, letting those big tears run down her cheeks. At last: "O God," she murmured, quoting something she had heard or read long, long ago, "turn back Thy universe and give us yesterday!"

Her lips, as naturally pink as pigeons' feet and needing no rouge to define their perfection, joined in a smile as she finished. Her flexible mouth widened and her cheeks lifted a little; a dimple dented the smooth flesh beside her mouth, her sensitive nostrils expanded—all the components of a smile appeared in her face. But there was no smile. It was, rather, a bitter grimace of derision. "But that would take a special kind of miracle, of course;" her voice seemed tired, so utterly weary it might have been that of an old woman, "and miracles like that, are out of date, aren't they? You gave them up after Capernaum and Bethany." Her acid laughter was a goading echo in the gathering dusk.

Something cool and black, faintly moist, insinuated itself into the hand she let trail idly beside her and a furred foot pawed her arm gently. "Oh!" she exclaimed, a little startled, then, "Oh, it's you, Mr. Chips," as she looked into the yellow eyes turned pleadingly to hers. "You want to go for your walk? Very well, go get the lead."

THE honey-colored cocker trotted off, nails clicking on the polished floor, and Angela rose half reluctantly, half eagerly to carry out the evening rite. Chips had come to them when he was a fist-sized bundle of soft fluffy fur about the shade of a Teddy bear. He had been Harold's dog, selected from a dozen sportive, friendly puppies at a pet shop on Fifth Avenue, and Harold had adored him, pampered him, looked after him from awkward, stumbling puppyhood to sedate middle age. When Harold went away to camp the duty of the daily run—which had slowed to a dignified amble with the years—devolved on Angela.

They made a circuit of the Square each evening just as dusk was deepening into dark. Chips strained at the lead, hanging back, investigating tree boxes, fire hydrants or the little bare spots of raw earth around the streetside trees with an interrogative black nose, giving vent to subdued snorts of approval or muted whimpers of disfavor at what he discovered. Angela indulged him for as long as seemed reasonable, then her sharp, "That's quite enough, Chips," brought him from his olfactory researches, and he would trot sedately beside her till fresh locations roused the latent archeologist in him again. In this way they effected complete encompassment of the

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Square, each occupied with his own thoughts, each tolerant of the other's privacy, as became gentlefolk, whether canine or human.

The air that flowed through the French windows of the drawing room bore a faint mingled scent of flowers, new-mown grass and recently washed asphalt as she snapped the snaffle of the lead to the dog's harness and made for the street. Van Nostrand Square was like an etching in the July night. Inside the cast-iron grilles of the park cannas and geraniums bloomed, two fountains spurted jets of water which fell tinkling into iron basins, the freshly cut lawns smelt sweet and warm. Northward, over the elms bordering the pavement, rose the tip of St. Jude's tower with its lighted clock dial round and bright and yellow as a harvest moon, across from it an ancient Quaker meeting house stood demurely in its small graveyard, and round the plaza ancient mansions, red-brick, white-marble trimmed, stood like old veterans in a hollow square. For the most part they had been made into "maisonettes" for people in the upper-middle-income tax brackets, but outwardly they retained the air of hauteur they had worn when Oakey Hall was mayor and Boss Tweed a scandal in New York politics. The July moon hung low in the sky, a disc of scorched gold with the branches of the elms and sycamores on its face as if drawn with charcoal, and every park bench held its complement of lovers. Lovers strolled along the cement paths, each pair absorbed in themselves as if they had been the last people in the world; the tarnished moonlight was a mellow wonderland to them.

Angela caught her breath with a small sad sound that was not quite a sob, but something not far from it. She had been a young wife, almost a bride, when Darcy died, but she had found some measure of solace in the knowledge that beneath her heart she bore that which would give him immortality:

"To die would not be dying quite,
Leaving a little life behind . . ."

And since she had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in her mouth she reared Darcy's son in a mellow atmosphere of ancestors, heirlooms and family tradition. All that came to him by nature had a chance to grow and develop and the final product was a slim brown man with curling hair and a quick friendly smile for whom the title "gentleman" seemed to have been hand-tailored and to whom clung the faint fragrance of gentle living.

She loved him for his sweet and winsome self, but more than that she loved him as his father's surrogate. In him the high hopes she and Darcy had dreamed in their short ecstacy of marriage were to be fulfilled, he would perpetuate the Logan name; born in a world cleansed of the curse of war by countless bloody sacrifices of his father's generation he would achieve the things that fate denied his father. Already he had shown a more than merely casual interest in the daughter of one of her classmates, and she had dreamed of being a grandmother before time had stolen strength and beauty from her.

Then December 7, 1941, the blare of trumpets and the roll of drums and streets responding to the pound of marching feet. Training camp . . . letters from England . . . the Normandy invasion . . . "the War Department regrets. . . ."

THERE were tears in her heart that would not come to her eyes for relief as she heard a girl's low "Always?" and her lover's promised "Always and forever, dear," as a young couple passed her.

"There," a shrill, vindictive voice seemed whispering, "there but for some drop stitch of Fate go Harold and Geraldine." All at once she felt unutterably old. Old and tired. Her hands felt numb and in the hollows of her shoulders ached a fine pain. "Oh, Harold, my poor, sweet boy," she murmured hopelessly. Blinded with sudden tears, almost all life gone from her fine, pliant body, lost and forsaken as a derelict, she leaned against the park's iron fence, sobbing with short retching sobs like the breathing of a spent runner.

Mr. Chips strained at the leash, shrank fearfully into the shadow of a friendly tree, dropped upon his stomach with a terrified whimper. The pull upon the lead roused her, and she straightened, then stepped back with a short involuntary "Oh!"

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Within arm's length of her stood a small neat gentleman in black mohair with a Panama hat set jauntily on one side of his head and a gold-headed black malacca stick swung jauntily from his hand. His dark, lined face and short white beard and mustache were those of an old man but his bearing was decidedly sprightly and his eyes very bright. They were unusual eyes, dark but not black, with little flecks of garnet in them.

They seemed to have no division between the irides and pupils and their habitual expression was one of heavy-lidded weariness, as though they had looked too closely at life for a long time. Just then, however, they were bent on her with a look of dispassionate irony which seemed more curious than malicious.

"You are in trouble, Madame?" He spoke with the slightest of slight accents, in the almost colorless tone of the perfect linguist. There was a suave, foreign-bred something in his words and manner, and the gesture with which he doffed his wide hat was somehow reminiscent of a Versailles courtier in the days when Bourbons sat upon the throne of France.

Angela gave back a step. Without quite knowing why she was afraid of this small harmless-looking gentleman with courtly manners, but the fear was natural and intuitive as that felt when we gazed into a snake-pit at the zoo. "There's nothing anyone can do to help," she answered shortly, tightened her hold on the dog's leash and stepped toward the curb to pass the little man.

"One moment, if you please." His voice, still soft, was mandatory in its even tone. "You are in trouble, yet you say no one can help you. Are you sure?"

She braced herself as for a physical assault. Instinctively she knew something was coming, something which might change the whole rhythm of life. She took a short breath, let it out soundlessly, then, "Of course, I'm sure." Her tone was razor-sharp with finality.

"There you make a mistake, Madame," the suave reply was compelling in its monotone. "There is nothing—understand me, *nothing*—which we cannot have if we desire it enough and are willing to pay its price."

"Pay?" her voice rose almost to a scream. "Dear God, I'd pay anything—"

"Anything, Madame?" There was irony, perhaps a hint a malice in the echoed word.

"Anything!"

"Then listen carefully, Madame." He fumbled in the pocket of his jacket and brought out a little doll-like image scarcely longer than her thumb. "Take this for a talisman. Concentrate your thought—your wish—on it. If you are strong enough in your desire—and if you do not haggle at the price—you may attain your wish, though whether it will bring you happiness or not I should not care to say."

Mechanically her fingers closed round the little puppet, and as she thanked him with an inclination of her head the little gentleman added, "If you should need me again throw the charm away and call me."

Despite herself, Angela laughed. "How can I call you? I don't even know your name."

"You will know what name to call if the need comes, Madame." The little man made her another bow which would have been a credit to a dancing master at the court of Louis XV. Then he replaced his hat at its slightly rakish angle and swinging his black cane strode off into the shadows.

THREE times Angela made a gesture of casting the doll into the gutter as she walked back to her house, but each time, smiling mirthlessly at herself for her weakness, she refrained. Back in her drawing room she snapped on the desk light and examined it.

It was carved or molded of some hard substance, perhaps soapstone or pottery, which had a velvety smoothness and retained an almost reptilian coolness despite the heat of the night and the warmth of her hand. The maker had shaped it to represent a man, or the grotesque of one, dressed in a medieval costume which consisted of long, pointed shoes, tight hose bound round with cross-garters, a loosely-hanging gabardine or cloak with foliated edges and sleeve-openings, and a close-fitting hood upon the head through which two openings had been cut to leave the ears exposed. The figure made her think of Punchinello, wide-shouldered, hunchbacked, with exaggeratedly sharp nose

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and chin, thick beetling brows above pop eyes, and a malicious, mocking grin. Somehow there was an air of hatefulness about it, an intimation of malevolence and animosity that repelled and yet fascinated her. The more she looked at it the more repulsive it seemed, and yet it had a certain charm like that which English bulldogs have by virtue of their very ugliness.

"He was an absurd little man," she told herself, "with all his foreign airs and graces, and his awful, deadly earnestness. . . ." Her voice trailed off, became mute, for another thought had crowded into her brain. "Use this as a talisman," he had said, "and concentrate your thought on it. If you are strong enough in your desire. . . ."

She rose, hands knotted into fists, and gazed at the small statuette. Her eyes were fixed, intense, half-closed, as if the violence of her gaze were too annihilating to be loosed direct; as if the substance of her soul and body would pour out of her set, staring orbs. "My boy," she whispered in a voice so low as to be hardly audible, but harsh as an abrasive scraped across metal. "Give back my son—put back the universe and give us yesterday!"

SOMEWHERE in the distance thunder rattled with a crackle like the sound of far-off musketry, into the heavy, humid air there crept a chill as tangible as smoke, and the sky shattered with a dazzling burst of yellow-green lightning.

She flinched from the flash as the telephone began ringing, at first querulously, then frantically, drilling at her. "Hello?" she greeted somewhat shakily, still startled by the lightning.

"Mother?" Her stomach suddenly felt stiff and empty, she could not fight down the weakness that chilled her with pulse-stopping cold. Weak-kneed as a rag doll from which the stuffing has been ripped, she dropped into a chair. What line, if any, divides sanity from madness, where does sanity end and madness begin? she wondered. Was this a trick of overwrought senses and gnawing desire, or was she the victim of an unspeakably cruel hoax?

"Who—who is this?" she contrived at last, and in the little interval of silence she could hear the pounding of her heart like a jazz-drummer's rataplan.

"Whom do *you* think?"

Another silence, one that hummed electrically. Then: "This joke's not in the best of taste," her voice was hard and gritty.

"Oh, *maman,* you'll be what the Heinies couldn't—the death o' me!" It was the well-remembered laugh that stirred her pulses like a long note on a trumpet.

"But—but—you're—you were—"

"No, I'm not, I assure you. Officially or not, I'm still alive and likely to be kickin' if you don't snap out of it. The report of my death was greatly exaggerated, old dear. I did have a tough time, and spent a tour of duty in hospital *sans* memory, *sans* dog-tags, *sans* everything but life. But here I am like the proverbial bad penny, safe and moderately sound. Be with you in a little while—just landed at the airport."

SHE was radiantly, arrogantly happy. Like one who wakens from a long dream-haunted night to find a morning with cool, limpid air and sunlight sparkling over everything. The twitterings of sparrow in the park seemed like a canticle: *For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.* Her face was transfigured by happiness as by a halo. The sunshine had a brighter gold, even when it rained the drops fell brightly, gleaming, jewel-like on the trees and window panes.

At first she did not notice the small, subtle changes in him, the absence of the little niceties which had been as inherent as his breath. When he did not hold her chair at dinner or rise when she came into the room she overlooked it. War was dirty, dull, dangerous and degrading, small wonder it had rasped the rococo of refinement from him. He had been meticulously neat, physically and mentally, now he was slovenly about his room, with clothes left carelessly on floor or chair or bed; in place of his alert, attentive manner he seemed oddly distraught. He would sit for minutes staring endlessly at nothing, his eyes strange, far-away, almost filmy with ennui, his shoulders slumping, as if nothing really mattered. Small blame to him, she thought. He had been to the very gates of hell, could she expect him to come back unmarked?

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Even when he showed no interest in employment she made excuses. A man who had had death for a bedfellow and boon companion could hardly be expected to take interest in a desk job, or grow enthusiastic over selling things. No matter, she had plenty for them both.

But had she? When he asked her for five hundred dollars for "a deal" she was delighted. He had determined to launch out for himself, not take an underling's position. When the deal fell through and he asked for a thousand she was more puzzled than worried. She had neither aptitude for nor experience in business, and knew only that men made or lost money in it. Harold, it appeared, was one of those who lost, for in a month he needed more, then more. Her income was derived from funds invested by the trust department of her bank, and earnings had not been as great this year as last. One morning came a notice from the bank that she was overdrawn. She made the necessary arrangements, sold off some bonds, and—had another notice of an overdraft within six weeks.

SHE knew she had not drawn five thousand dollars in one check, and went down to the bank to see about it. There it was, payable to Harold Logan, made out in her own handwriting, signed with her own signature. But the signature was not hers.

"Oh, yes, now I remember," she told the cashier, and embarrassment brought a quick flush to her face. "I had forgotten—this."

The complete absence of expression in the banker's face voiced skepticism sharper than his words. "That's your signature, Mrs. Logan?"

"Why, yes, of course," she spoke with more than necessary emphasis. "Of course, it's mine. Why do you ask?"

"Our teller was a little doubtful, but the check's entirely in your writing, and the payee is your son—"

"I don't think you need make yourselves uneasy over any check my son presents." She spaced her syllables precisely, so they sounded clipped and hard.

The visitor was not the sort of person she was used to entertaining. He was something less than middle height, dark-skinned, black-haired, curly-haired. His light-gray, almost white suit had been pressed into knife-sharp creases, from the breast pocket of his jacket spilled a gray-silk handerchief, he had been freshly shaved and manicured and exuded a faint odor of brandy, garlic and lilac perfume. His brown skin shone as if it had been rubbed with oil, his eyes danced with a light more sinister than merry, his full, too-red lips framed a smile more nearly contemptuous than good-humored.

He did not, however, lack directions. "You're Logan's old lady?" he asked.

"I am Mrs. Logan."

"Uh-huh," He looked at her, a little puzzled, just a little uneasy. His eyes swept up and down her as if they had been adding a column of figures and were not entirely satisfied with the answer. At last: "You love 'im, don't you?"

"I'm sure you didn't call to ascertain the strength of my maternal affection, Mr.—" she paused interrogatively, and the cold, slightly amused contempt of her gaze seared him as an early frost withers a row of larkspur.

"Huh? Oh—" He fumbled for a word, then brought his reply out, and with it an oblong of green paper. "I'll tell th' cockeyed world I didn't. I come here to get gelt for this." He held the slip out, a check made payable to Joseph Lanzilotti in the sum of seven hundred dollars, signed with her name.

"I don't remember making any check to you, Mr. Lanzilotti."

"Don't, huh? Then it's just too bad for your kid. That's all I gotta say."

"I don't think I quite understand—"

"Lemme fill you in, lady. He rolled me Saturday night in a crap game, your kid, that is, an' when I took 'im for a half gran' he give me his I.O.U. Nex' day he come and gimme this"— he indicated the check —"an' got two hun'nert fish in change for it. See? Then when I goes to th' bank this mornin' they reneges on th' signature. Says they gotta have your O. K. 'fore they'll lemme have th' money. Come clean, lady. Slap your O. K. on it, or little Harold goes to th' pokey. See?"

"You make it very clear, Mr. Lanzilotti."

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She took the check, endorsed it, "O. K. Angela Logan," and returned it. "In future I'd advise you not to play games with my son," she cautioned as she went with him to the door. "I might not see your point so readily next time."

Joe Lanzilotti knew when he was outclassed. Also, from long frequenting of race courses, he knew a thoroughbed when he saw one. "Sure, lady," he agreed as he tipped his pearl-gray Homberg with more than customary flourish, "I won't never let th' bum come in my jernt ag'in, an' I'll top all th' other mugs to give 'im th' shoofly if he comes buzzin' round th' gallopin' dominoes."

SHE had just the sort of dinner that delighted him that night, steak two inches thick, the tenderloin charred on the outside, pink as a poodle's tongue inside, lyonnaise potatoes, chicory salad and a chocolate graham pie. Since he no longer cared for sherry as an apéritif she chilled a shaker of Manhattans and had a bottle of Nuites St. Georges brought up from the cellar. But when he came in, so late the steak was ruined and the cocktails little more than ice water, he was slightly tipsy and more than a little truculent. "Got here soon as I could," he explained rather than apologized. "That dam' subway—"

She noted that he made no move to kiss her, and was stung by the omission. "Oh, that's all right, son. If you can stand cold steak I'm sure the steak and I don't mind waiting—"

"Good Lord, steak again? I swear to God I'm getting so I daren't look a cow in the eye—" His nonchalance was poorly worn as he dropped into his chair.

She filled their glasses, tasted hers, then stared silently into its ruddy depths. "A friend of yours was here today, Harold. A Mr. Lanzilotti—quite a character."

"Eh?" She saw his eyes go suddenly wide, startled and questioning, a little frightened. "What'd he want?"

"You ought to know—"

His chair crashed on the floor as he rose, glaring at her. "Well, what're you going to do? Send me up for forgery—"

"Harold!"

"All right, you needn't be dramatic about it." There was a morose recklessness about his pose as he stalked from the room, but at the doorway he came to a halt and in the courtly way he bowed his head before he left there was an echo of the old, aristocratic elegance that marked his every move in former days.

She lit a cigarette, snubbed out its fire before it had a chance to glow, then lit another. In her chest by her heart there was a dull ache and her knees felt weak and unsubstantial. She wasn't sure she could stand. Any moment, she knew, she might be sick.

The shrilling of the doorbell wakened her from her trancelike misery, and the tap-tap of high heels that followed was like a tonic. Geraldine Macfarland! Mightn't Gerry be the answer to her problem? Harold had been more than casually interested in her before he went away; she'd done everything she could to throw them together since his return. She was only nineteen years older than her son, but they were of different generations, just the same. She was not one of those fatuous fools who boasted she and her offspring were "pals," but Gerry—perhaps romantic love could work a reformation where maternal affection failed.

"Gerry, dear," she greeted, holding out slim bare arms to the girl, "I'm so glad you—why, what's the matter, darling?"

Gerry's pretty pink-and-white face was ravaged as a garden following a savage storm, and the hands that seized hers were cold while the cheek that pressed against hers burned as if with fever. "Aunt Angela," the passionless, cold little voice went into her like a dentist's drill, "I've got to talk to you—and Harold—right away."

"Of course," she led the way to the drawing room and dropped down on a love seat, pulling the girl down beside her. "Now, what is it, dear?"

Gerry's slender fingers wreathed and unwreathed, twisting blindly, futilely as worms. "It's about Harold—me—us, Aunt Angela. I've been feeling miserable for some time, nauseated nearly every morning, nervous as a cat, pains in my chest. Today I called on Dr. Christy. He says I'm—we're—going to have—"

The world seemed suddenly to have stopped, and breathing with it. The silence was so overpowering she could hear the

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blood pound in her throat. Then, like a gallant boxer, beaten, but determined to fight to the final knockout, she rallied. "*Autres temps, autres moeurs,* dear," somehow she contrived a smile which was a reasonable facsimile of the real thing. "In my day this would have been a scandal, but you and Harold can be married quietly—"

"That's just it! He won't—"

"Oh, *no-o!*" stark, utter misery made her voice quaver. "He couldn't be such a cad. Not—"

His footsteps, slightly unsteady, came down the stairs. He was humming:

"The minstrels sing of a jovial king;
A wonderful king was he . . ."

HE HALTED at the doorway. "Goin' out, Mom. Goin' to give the gals a treat— Hi, Gerry," he waved an indifferent greeting to the caller. "Be seein' you around sometime—"

"Harold!" How she kept her voice from breaking, kept from screaming, Angela had no idea. "Come here—sit down—I want to talk—"

"Eh?" He shot a sharp glance from her to the girl. "Oh, I see, she's told you—"

"Yes, she's told me—"

"And just what are you goin' to do about it?"

"I think that you're the one to answer that."

"Do, eh? Well, I can answer in one word: Nothing. How does she know that it was I—how do I know—"

"Oh, Harold!" Geraldine's voice was pitched shrill, but controlled. "Oh, how could you—and I loved you so!"

He laughed, and Angela felt everything inside her shrivel as if touched with live flame.

This was no laugh of bravado, no brazen attempt to face indecency. He was amused—that was the devilish, unbelievable thing about it.

She had risen to face him, now she took a step back. Her lips opened, then shut again. With apocalyptic clarity she saw him as if for the first time. She could look through him distinctly as if using a spiritual X-ray. And he was bad. Bad. Rotten clear through as maggot-bitten fruit is rotten.

Raw misery was stark in her eyes as they swept round the room and came to momentary rest upon the figurine the little foreign gentleman had given her the night Harold came home. "Saint Punchinello," she had called the thing affectionately, the patron who had brought her dead back to her. Now her gaze hardened, froze like water into a sudden zero temperature. In three quick, almost stumbling steps she crossed the room and snatched the statuette from the desk. Something deep inside herself—or perhaps a thing outside—put the words she had never heard before in her mouth. "*Barran-Sathanas!*" she called in a voice that was like a dissonant chord. "*Barran-Sathanas!*" She hurled the image from her as if it had been a loathsome reptile.

Outside the November night was still as ice and bitter cold, the moonlight struck chill fire from frost-encrusted paving stones, the stars shone with a crystalline brightness, and not a cloud showed in the smalt-blue sky, but as the little figure struck the baseboard and shattered as if it had been blown glass there came a distant cannonade of thunder and a zigzag lance of lightning slashed through the sky like a sword through flesh. The front door—she knew that it was latched and chained!—swung open and a step sounded in the hall.

"*Eh bien,* Madame," said the small gentleman as he bowed in the doorway leading from the hall to drawing room, "it seems you have repented of your bargain. You find the price too high?"

HE WORE a faultless dinner kit, black pearls glowed dully in his shirtfront, the thick white hair that sloped up from a widow's peak on his forehead was brushed back sleekly in a pompadour, his little white mustache and beard were neatness personified, but there was that in his lined face that bludgeoned her with horror. His features were not so much old as ancient, yet they seemed ageless, too; he seemed to be a part of that which had been, was, and was to be.

Somehow she found her voice, forced throat and tongue and lips to function. "The price?" she echoed, and her whisper was a queer small ghost of sound. "Dear God, yes, it's too high! I would not call my boy—my fine, clean, gentle boy—back from his hon-

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ored grave to be a thing like this. I would not slake the thirst of my sorrow if quenching it means misery to Geraldine—"

"Your sentiments do you great credit, Madame, but should you not have thought of all that when you asked that the universe be turned back?"

"How could I know—"

"True, Madame, how could you? But you were warned the price might be exorbitant—"

"Take me!" she broke in between chattering teeth. "Kill my body, rend it, tear it—burn my wretched soul for all eternity in your hell, but put my dear, brave son back where he belongs with the honored dead who died for decency and freedom. Let him lie in the earth hallowed by his blood, and by the blood of other mother's sons—"

"Your soul, Madame?" He brushed his wisp of white mustache with the knuckle of a bent forefinger. "You put extraordinary value on a bit of rather trumpery *bijouterie*, don't you? Besides, what need have I for more souls? From Rome, Berlin and Tokyo, from Moscow and Madrid—" He waved a deprecating hand. "Really, I suffer an embarrassment of riches. Sometimes I think I'll have to set a quota on the importations."

She dropped to her knees, inched toward him, held up empty, supplicating hands. "Barran—great Barran-Sathanas—Lord and Master—"

"Don't be a fool," he said as casually as if refusing a second cup of coffee.

"Take me, take me, mighty Lord of the World, do with me as you will, only give my boy back to the earth made sacred by his blood—"

"You annoy me, Madame. Once every thousand years or so it pleases me to strike a bargain, then remit the *quid pro quo*. Think well; there is no turning back this time. You would not have your son restored to life; you are willing that he go down to the grave again—"

"I beg you, I beseech you; I entreat you—"

"So be it. Have it as you wish." His sharp dark eyes bored into hers, and in them the small garnet speckings seemed to glow to incandescence. "Have your wish, mother. And this"—he bent above her, laid two fingers on her bowed head—"this is for remembering."

Only once before had Angela felt anything like it. That was when as a child she had held the electrodes of a galvanic battery while a playmate ground the generator. Every nerve seemed suddenly knotted, all her muscles twisted into ropes of pain, a light as dazzling as aurora borealis flared before her eyes, her throat closed in quick, agonizing contraction, her breath stopped and she wilted to the floor with no more life in her than a dead thing.

SLOWLY consciousness returned. The big room echoed small sounds hollowly, like an empty auditorium. Outside she heard the splashing of the fountains and the distant gleeful shouts of children romping under street-showers. Somewhere not far away two cats indulging in illicit romance split the air with feline love calls and the big clock in the hall ticked with deliberate decorum. A little breeze stirred the scrim curtains at the front windows, and over all was the soft, clinging sultriness of a July night.

She sat up, pressed the back of her hand to her forehead a bewildered moment, and got slowly to her feet. "I dreamed it," she told herself tremulously. "How horrible!" Yet had it been only a dream? In olden days the Lord spoke to Jacob and Samuel, giving them a vision past their waking senses. Might she not have been vouchsafed such a boon? If Harold had come back and—"Dear Lord, I thank Thee for this mercy," she murmured. "He's safe where he is, safe always and forever, secure in honored glory—"

She tottered to the desk, took up the Army form, wrote acceptance of the first option in a firm hand. Let the young oak lie where it had fallen; let him lie beside his comrades with his white cross above him, and over all, triumphantly, the flag he died to serve. . . . Some little spot of earth that is forever home. . . .

She glanced up. In the glass above the desk she saw her reflection. Across the dark hair waved above her forehead was a double line of startling white, as if two fingers lightly dipped in flour had been laid on it.

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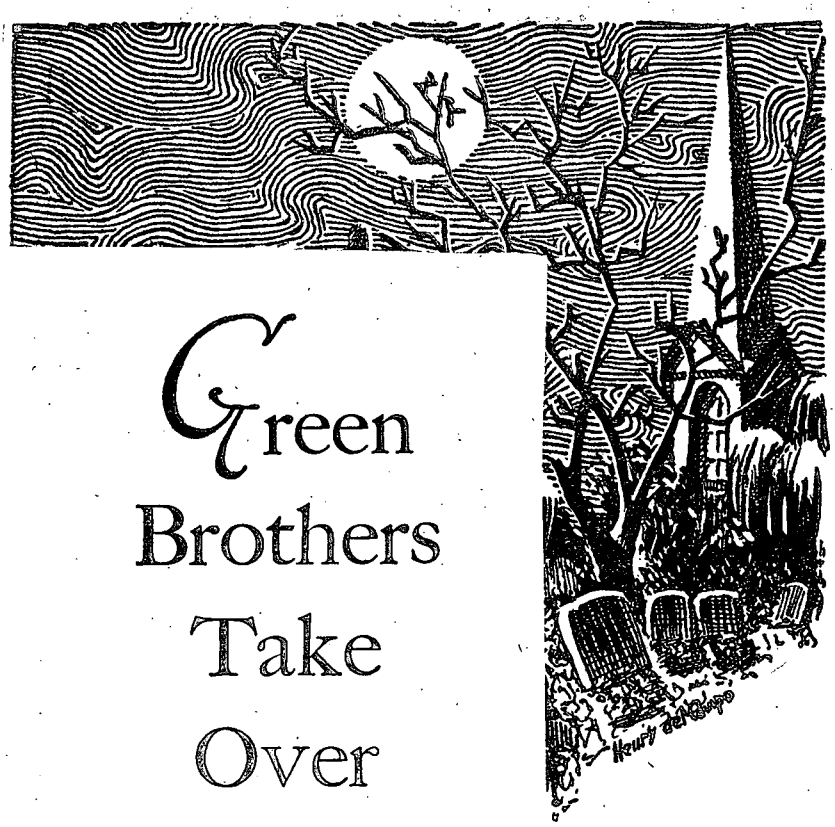

Green Brothers Take Over

BY MARIA MORAVSKY

OLD Roy Taber, the one-eyed nursery man, had the best plants in Orangeville. When people commented on his lush palms, brilliant hibiscus and thrifty citrus trees, adding that he must have a green thumb, he nodded his shaggy graying head absent-mindedly, saying cryptically:

"I've a green eye."

That was a curious thing to say, as his only good eye was hazel colored. His left artificial eye, made long ago when a thorn of carissa deprived him of his real one, had a slightly greenish cast. They did not match glass eyes in those days as well as they do now.

That greenish eye of his did not look glassy on rainy days, perhaps because the warm damp mists of Florida which invaded his nursery then, toned down its dry stare. When violent showers watered his plants, saving him the work of dragging the hose from one potting bench to another, his artificial eye seemed to grow alive.

To Roy, it did not only seem alive. To all purposes it was a living eye. He would cover his good eye with his calloused right hand, and insisted that he could still see—with that greenish left eye of his.

"That carissa repented. . . . I sure treated that shrub right. She was mighty sorry she poked my eye out. So now—I see with my store eye. I got a green eye."

"The old man is nuts," some neighbors opined. But others modified this belief.

"He just imagines it. He knows all his

They said he had a green thumb—it went a lot deeper than that!

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plants; can find them in the dark, by touch. Why, he can tell double red hibiscus from single cerise ones, even when they don't bloom, just by passing his fingers over the leaves."

I was Roy's nearest neighbor, and often traded plants with him, peddling them in the nearby residential city of Flamingo. White women don't often peddle in Florida; perhaps this was why I had many customers —more customers than plants. I could not grow too much on one lot, so I would buy them from Roy for resale. That's how we struck up a friendship.

One day during the late building boom, when I went to buy from Roy several multi-colored caladiums for a contractor who wanted to stick a few plants around his jerry-built house in a hurry, to enhance its sale, Roy told me:

"Mrs. Holland, it ain't right that a widow of a Spanish war veteran should peddle for a living when these here speculators build houses on credit, wreck all the windbreaks, denude the soil, and make more on one deal than you can earn in years."

I shook my white hair. I could no longer afford dyeing it and having a permanent.

"That's all right by me, Roy. I can't envy them. I have my little pension, and my old barn is all free and clear. They'll get stuck with those new houses, anyhow. Statistics show that there are three hundred unsold houses begging every month."

"It ain't all right by me, Mrs. Holland. That guy who bought the two lots next to my nursery, on the west side, is crowding me out."

I FELT alarmed. The west lots were full of Roy's plants which overgrew from his crowded garden. Seventy-eight kinds of hibiscus in nail kegs, young budded avacados in butter tubs.

Besides, there were innumerable smaller cans standing in the shade of an enormous cabbage palm which grew right on the line of Roy's property.

"He is going to cut down the palm," Roy informed me tragically.

So it was not the space he was about to lose which worried him, but the life of the venerable palm.

I felt sad. Roy loved that palm. We went over and looked at it, to fix it in our memories before it was gone.

It was really a perfect specimen. Tall and graceful, despite its girth; it must have been a yard in circumference. It's lush green fronds reached out like protecting green wings, six to seven feet long, forming a natural slat house over the plants it shaded. Ferns grew in the crotches of those fronds: curly ostrich plume-ferns, peacock fern, with blue and green metallic sheen on its delicate lacy leaves; wild prehistoric fern of Florida with a strange Latin name which I could never remember; a beautiful fern which nobody wanted because it could not be transplanted, wilting in the captivity of pots. Scarlet African orchids with purple centers. Aloes climbed up the palm's trunk, making a magnificent floral display. There was enough vegetation on and around that palm to stock a small nursery.

"Wouldn't you think that guy Filbrick might spare Aloha, to shade his flimsy duplexes?" Roy asked bitterly. He had a name for every outstanding tree.

"I'll talk to him about it. Being a would-be neighbor, perhaps . . ."

"I sure thank you, Mrs. Holland. I hate to speak to the louse; afraid I might lose my temper."

I piled my red, rose, and white caladiums into the toy wagon of my youngest grandson—he had outlived that wagon long ago and joined the army, following in the steps of his late grandfather—and pulled the tottering toy slowly out of Taber's nursery, along the driveway shaded by two silver oaks.

There used to be three oaks there, but the last hurricane had felled the tallest one. Roy had blasted out its huge stump, and fresh centipede grass grew over it.

I rested for a moment on that spot in the sunshine; the wagon loaded with earth-packed pots was too heavy for my old arms to pull. Solicitously as ever, Roy laid down his garden trowel and came over to help me.

When he pulled the wagon out to the pavement, I asked:

"What are you going to plant in this empty spot?"

"Oh, I don't know. Another oak, I think. They are good for orchids to live on. Orchids are not parasites, you know. They

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are mostly air plants. There are very few terrestrial orchids."

Roy had told me that repeatedly. He must be getting quite old, and his memory was no longer good, I thought, listening politely.

"All right, Roy. Thank you." I took the wagon's handle from his soil stained hand. "From now on it's easy sailing. I have only a few steps along the pavement, then I'm home.

"My driveway is cemented, and the wagon won't catch at any roots. Now go back to your plants."

NEXT morning, when I saw Filbrick with Jones, the local bulldozer operator, talking loudly on the street, I walked toward them and asked:

"Please, Mr. Filbrick, will you tell Jones to spare that large palm right on the line, when he is cleaning your lots? It is such an old, beautiful tree. . . ."

"Sure," Jones agreed amiably, "I can drive me blade right around it. No need fellin' that big tree, iffen you want it for shade, Mr. Filbrick."

Filbrick wrinkled his hooked nose.

"It's nothing but a wild palm; it stands too close to the house I plan. I mean to put a sunken garbage receptacle there, next to the kitchen door."

In that moment, I hated the man. To replace the palm with a garbage hole!

Speechless with indignation, I left them abruptly and walked back to my empty house.

That old cypress house is empty in more senses than one. Not only is my family gone, but most of my furniture as well. Paying doctors' bills—my arthritis is always bad during cold snaps—groceries at impossible prices. But I did not mind the restful emptiness of those high-ceilinged rooms and porches. It helped me to relax, to read, or to look into my crystal ball without feeling crowded. "Fenced in" as Roy would say.

I sat now in front of that old crystal ball, given me by my Spanish step-mother on my wedding day, forty years ago. It was held by a stand representing a chicken leg. I forget now the name of the voodoo sect which used this symbol in Cuba; my memory must be getting as bad as Roy's. . . . But I have always enjoyed playing with this thing, pretending to see in it the future of which so little was left.

I sat in front of it now, wiped its surface and peered into the dim glass, thinking about Roy's favorite and doomed palm.

At first I did not see anything. But I heard the whining of the bulldozer, and an occasional thud of a falling tree. Then I began seeing those uprooted trunks, lying one on another, piled at the back of the lot, their branches twisted and broken. . . . Tears strung my eyes.

I turned away from my crystal ball. Did I imagine all this, or was my stepmother really a witch? Did she leave some of her powers to me? Today I did not like to play with the idea.

Uneasily I heaved myself out of the old rattan chair standing in front of the round marble-topped table with the crystal ball. As I stole a last glance at the greenish globe its base seemed to move slightly, as if the chicken leg supporting it turned toward the doomed trees.

"Loneliness is beginning to drive you nuts, Marianna," I told myself sternly.

AFTER I sold my caladiums one by one (I never could carry two of those heavy pots in my little basket) to the owner of a new house in Flamingo who refused to come for them, I had a pot of strong tea at the local five and ten, then I looked around a bit to see what my competitors were selling on their plant counter. I noticed a straggling gardenia cooped up in a small Mexican pot, marked two dollars. One of its underwatered twigs was hanging at an angle, broken by some careless would be customer, I presume. I looked covertly around, then took out the small pen knife I always carry in my bag, and snipped off the broken twig.

"I'll put it in water and grow this cutting. It will give me a start in gardenias," I thought with the optimism born, I suppose, out of that pot of strong tea I had just drunk.

By the time I returned to Orangeville by bus, I saw the futility of my plan. Gardenias called for special fertilizer; they had to be kept on an elevated platform, planted in peat moss. I had neither materials nor energy to start something new out of nothing, as I used to do when much younger.

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So, before returning home I walked over to Roy's nursery and offered him the cutting.

"Thanks, Mrs. Holland. I'll put it with my Stephanotis vines. They feed on the same kind of fertilizer," he said, carefully deleafing the twig and trimming it with his cutting knife. "Every little baby plant helps." He handled that cutting as tenderly as if it had been an infant.

"I have bad news for you, Roy," I began regretfully.

"I know," he answered somberly. "Aloha told me. They want to cut her down."

I smiled at his whimsical way of expressing himself: the palm told him, eh? It was sad, yet charming in a way. He must have foreseen what was coming; he knew those heartless contractors.

"What is a tree to a speculator?" I said bitterly. "He wants to put a garbage pail container in its place."

Roy pursed his thin pale lips and sighed. Then he said earnestly:

"Mighty told me about that."

Mighty was one of the two silver oaks shading the driveway. Mighty told him! This was carrying whimsicality too far. I smiled deprecatingly:

"You mustn't repeat everything your imagination whispers to you. . . . Some of your customers take it literally, you know."

"I mean it," he said with fanatical conviction. "My green brothers always whisper to me what is coming, if it concerns them."

I gasped. Roy had never expressed his queer notions so openly before. Not even to me.

Reading the unbelief in my face, he said defensively:

"Animals feel how you treat them, why not plants? We are all one family: men, animals, birds, insects, trees. Why should men place themselves apart? Our green brothers are eating almost the same things we eat. They need the same vitamins. I always give my cuttings vitamin B-1; chemiculturists advise it. You do it too, don't you, Mrs. Holland?"

I nodded doubtfully. To be sure, I knew from my small encyclopedia on plants that transplanting equals a major operation for plants. I, too, mix vitamin B-1 in their nutrient solution, so the plants never suffer the shock of transplanting. They don't wilt.

"You're right, to a certain extent, Roy. Granted: plants grow like humans, eat like humans. But I doubt if they feel like we do. And they can't read our thoughts."

"They don't feel? They why does mimosa fold her leaves when a stranger touches it, and doesn't budge when I stroke its twig? Can you explain this?"

Frankly, I couldn't, and admitted it. So Roy continued assuring me that plants communicate with him.

"Because I love my green brothers. They are on my side."

I kept silent. It was no use arguing against such hearty belief. I realized only now how brotherly was Roy's love for his plants. He hated to prune them. When he had to use shears, he always asked the plants' forgiveness for cutting off their branches. Whenever he snipped a dead twig, I heard him muttering:

"It's for your own good, my dear."

I had not paid serious attention to these whimsicalities before; we all talk to our pets, at least lonely people do. Other men and women, including myself, talked to their plants while tending them. It did not mean a thing. Nothing at all, except in Roy's case. . . .

My uneasiness grew.

THAT night, during the full moon, from my sleeping porch I saw a figure moving in one of the lots adjoining Roy's nursery. I peered through the screen at the narrow path silvered by the moonlight, which ran between my lot and Roy's nursery, traversing the two vacant lots between. They were grown over with palmetto, with only five stately Carribbean pines between.

Curiosity prompted me to throw on my black Mother Hubbard (I still wear mourning, after all these years of widowhood. Melancholy habit, I suppose.) I walked across the vacant lots, to see what he was doing, for I guessed that it was Roy. I heard a faint whine of metal, and saw Roy sawing off large fronds from the side of the palm where Filbrick's houses were to stand.

"Roy! Why are you doing this?" I asked.

He turned his lean, wrinkled face toward me, paler than usual in the dead white of the moon.

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"I hope that he may spare the tree if I cut off these long fronds. . . . Perhaps . . . I want them to be out of his way."

I felt a lump in my throat. So he wanted the palm to look less spreading; inconspicuous . . . So a mother hen shoos her babies under her wings, hiding them from the enemy. The simile was not exactly true, but the emotion was the same.

"What are you going to do with all these plants?" I asked, pointing to the numerous cans surrounding the palm, over and around which Roy had to walk to approach the palm's trunk.

"I still have till tomorrow. That bun says if I don't remove them by then he'll throw them out. I'll put them in my driveway."

"That won't leave you space for your truck."

"Well, what can I do? The truck will have to be parked outside."

"Put it in my driveway. I haven't any car."

"Thanks, Mrs. Holland."

Although I was poorer than Roy, and less old, he always addressed me as Mrs. Holland, while I called him by his first name. This curious touch of inferiority sense on his part dated, perhaps, to the time when he was starting his nursery with several empty cans and a plot of rented ground. Now his was paying, and I was just a run down at the heel gentlewoman who tried to survive on her small pension plus the sale of a few potted plants.

I'll help you to move your plants in the morning, Roy," I promised.

BUT we could not save any of them. In the morning Roy had an attack of hives. Curious how he always had fever when something upset him. I had to nurse him—he couldn't afford a nurse. All through his delirium he whispered:

"Now, they're wrecking it. All my plants . . ."

Next day he was better, but his mind still wandered. He stared out the window, at the pile of rubbish which was once his plants, and raved:

"They couldn't wait! They ordered the Negroes to pile them in a scrap heap! Months of work, years of growth! Look at those poor roots sticking up in the air. My beautiful hibiscus! My confederate jasmine, my red jasmine, my star jasmine! Grafted gardenias, young mangoes. Murdered, all murdered. . . . But the sun will burn the roots of the rest. Massacre! Massacre! Of my innocent green brothers!"

I gave him a sedative, and left to attend to my few household chores. Besides, I had to be at home in the morning—a customer was coming to get a promised red madagascar vine.

When I went again to see how Roy was getting along, I saw the doomed palm standing desolate amid the debris.

"Aloha is still alive," I told Roy, feeling his cooled forehead. "I hope he'll spare her. I do hope he won't cut her down."

But the speculator did. He did not murder the palm himself; he was too puny for that. He ordered Jones to push it down with his bulldozer. Years for a tree to grow, and one push . . . It was pitiful.

As the beautiful palm shuddered in the still air, before falling across the lot next to the trunks of the five uprooted pines, its tremor appeared almost human. It seemed to express a terror of sudden death. When it fell, frightening a mocker out of its nest, I stifled a cry.

I rushed over to see how Roy was taking it. He was not in his potting shed. He was not in the open. I went to his house, and stopped on the porch, hating to disturb him. Through the glass panel of his front door I saw him lying on the couch, face downward. His shoulders moved convulsively . . .

I gently lowered the raised knocker, and left him alone with his grief.

I went to the denuded lots, after the bulldozer had performed its lethal task, and forced myself to look at the fallen palm. Stepping over its broken and twisted fronds, I picked off its trunk as many African orchids as I could carry in my apron, and brought them over to Roy.

He was sitting dejectedly on his potting bench, his long legs dangling over a pile of black loam ready for transplanting. His tools lay idle; he could not work that day. I saw his good eye watering. . . . His greenish artificial eye, unsoftened by tears, looked fierce.

"He will pay for it." he whispered hoarsely, as he saw me. Then he noticed the orchids. "Oh, thank you. Thank you . . ."

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Tenderly he took them out of my apron and laid them on a small pile of leafmold.

"I'll plant these in good beds. They won't miss Aloha's trunk . . . as I do," he finished bitterly, his mouth twisting. I had never seen him so sad and bitter before.

"I've looked at that palm for twenty years, ever since my wife died. I hoped to enjoy it for the rest of my life. . . . He'll pay for it, he'll pay! Green brothers will see to that."

There was nothing I could say to comfort him. I felt very much the same way. I also loved that palm and hated its murderer. I guess we were just two nuts growing attached to green things since our loved ones had died or left us.

As I was returning to my house, walking across the overgrown lawn sprinkled with the red petals of the shedding poinciana blooms, I repeated Roy's words:

"Green Brothers . . . Green Brothers . . ." I was appalled at the sound of my voice: it held an appeal for vengeance.

HURRICANE season came, and with it the builders. Filbrick, being a Northerner, did not realize how many interruptions the rains would cause. He swore at the showers as if they were deliberately doing him wrong, when his workers were forced to loaf under the shelter of the half-constructed houses.

But finally the hammering ceased, the concrete mixer stopped thumping, the electric saw whined no more, the smell of tar dispersed over the flat, pebbled roofs. The two duplexes stood, still unpainted, their floors still uncovered with synthetic tile, exposing the raw thickness of six inches of solid concrete. These houses were inexpensive, but not jerry-built, I had to admit.

I looked at my own frame house and sighed. Those two would stand a hurricane much better. It must feel safe to live in a concrete block house during a big blow.

Weeks passed, and the houses still stood unfinished. It looked as if Filbrick had run out of money. I saw him Sunday after Sunday bringing visitors in his rickety station wagon, and unfolding blueprints before them, pointing eloquently to his duplexes.

"He is trying hard to sell them," I remarked to Roy now and then.

"He'll never sell them!" Roy would answer with hatred in his voice. "He'll die first!"

I was growing more and more frightened. Did Roy contemplate killing the contractor? It would be sheer insanity. No tree was worth that.

One rainy Sunday, when the vegetation seemed to grow by leaps and bounds, and every blade of grass to double in size over night—tropical rains do this here, you know—I saw a good looking gray car of late vintage stopping in front of the nearest unfinished duplex. The older I grow the more curious I grow. I went unashamedly to spy after the would-be buyer.

Filbrick's greasy face was beaming. With a satisfied expression, he wiped his sweaty bald forehead with a soiled handkerchief, showing his false teeth in a wide grin to his customer. He must have made a sale, I thought.

His customer, a mousy little man in well-cut clothes, with narrow shoulders and a decided paunch, walked gingerly up the few cement blocks put by the kitchen door of the unfinished house on the right. He wanted to make sure of his purchase, I presume; looking for flaws.

"You don't need to worry, Mr. Baum," Filbrick assured him grandly, deferentially helping him over the imprompto steps. "First-class construction . . . Solid concrete floors . . . They'll be real pretty, when the tiles are laid . . . Now, what's that?"

A grunt of utter dismay escaped his thick lips, echoed by an angry exclamation from the would-be-buyer.

"You call this solid construction?" the man asked witheringly.

Moved by irresistible curiosity, I mounted the steps and loked inside, toward the corner at which the city buyer pointed his accusing pudgy finger. I almost gasped aloud, for in that corner, raising its tendrils from the solid six-inch concrete floor, grew a long and lush Virginia creeper.

"How did it happen?" Filbrick sounded positively stricken. "I—this floor—why, feel it, Mr. Baum."

Baum prodded it with a piece of moulding he picked up from the floor. The floor gave way, crumbling into its component parts of sand and fill, and forming a large hole in which the vine grew, its five-fingered

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leaves lifted up like so many cheering green hands.

FILBRICK swore, grabbed the vine by its branching out stem and tried to pull it out of the damaged floor. But he couldn't. The triumphant vine must have sunk its roots far under the foundation.

Much as I disliked the speculator, I knew it was not his fault. I'd walked over those floors a week after they were laid. They had set by then—it was before the rains started—and the previous dry weather had made them hard and solid. How could a vine grow through six inches of set concrete?

"I don't undedstand it," Filbrick pleaded, as if continuing my own thoughts. "The mixture was just right. A strong mixture. I can prove it. I bought it already prepared from . . ." He named the most reputable building material firm in Flamingo.

Baum shook his head. "If it were right, it wouldn't disintegrate." His mousy face composed itself into the lines of outraged authority. "The deal is off."

I rushed to Roy, to tell him about my eavesdropping. I found him placing leaf mold on the bottoms of five gallon cans, preliminary to transplanting his well started hibiscus cuttings.

"I know all about it. My green brothers told me." He waved his outstretched hand in the air. As I looked at those spatulate fingers, greenish from the mess of the inadvertantly broken stems, I seemed to perceive some weird resemblance between them and the five-fingered palm of the Virginia creeper.

"They wrecked the floor for him," Roy reiterated with glum satisfaction. "No use of him pulling out that creeper. It will grow all over again. All over . . . My green brothers will take over."

In that moment I had a suspicion that Roy was growing insane.

"You must have been looking in my crystal ball," I joked lightly, trying to hide my consternation.

"No, they *told me*. Look into that crystal yourself, and tell me about their work in the future."

"What work?" I asked. But he looked at me meaningly, and did not answer.

Perplexed, to say the least, I returned to my house. A customer, who came to get a few surinum cherry shrubs, detracted me for a while from disturbing thoughts. But after her car rumbled away, with a sudden bump over the emergency pipe laid over the street for water which the builders borrowed from a neighbor for construction, I thought again about Roy's fantastic prophecy.

Arriving home, I sat in front of my crystal ball, now placed out of the way on an antique pre-Dieu in my spare bedroom, next to the family Bible in a crumbling leather cover. I pushed away the Bible, out of reverence, as if the fortune telling ball might contaminate it. A dust of gilt, coming off its cover, stained the tips of my fingers. I looked at them for a long time, before I mustered courage to look at my crystal ball.

At once I saw clouds of smoke billowing within it. Then a single tongue of flame shot up high, above . . . yes, above the roofs of Filbrick's duplexes.

Trembling, I looked closer. I had never thought of fire in connection with those nearly fireproof concrete block buildings. Therefore I could not have imagined it. How did the fire start?

I looked again. It was licking the wooden rafters; their sheeting already devoured by flame. The sickening odor of burning tarred felt filled the room. I rushed away from the crystal ball. The smell of smoke was too realistic.

It was ever so; the adjoining buildings were on fire. Soon I heard the wail of fire engines.

In a very short while the firemen had the conflagration under control. I stood on the street by the brand new red engine, together with other curious onlookers, and listened to the questions the fire chief shouted at the two Negroes who worked for Filbrick. They answered meekly:

"The boss asked us to burn this here trash . . ." They pointed to the pile of trees wrecked by the bulldozer. Their words came almost in unison, as if they had been rehearsed.

The chief looked puzzled.

"Does the owner have a fire permit?"

"Dunno . . . we wuz jist ordered."

"All right. It wasn't your fault. But . . ." He dismissed the Negroes with a wave of his heavily gloved hand, and looked at the heat-

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cracked bricks and smoking wood with a puzzled frown.

"The wind was from the east," he muttered. "How come the fire moved south?"

I ASKED myself the same question, afraid to answer it. The five fallen pines and the huge trunk of the murdered palm lay to the north of the houses.

I shook my head, chasing away the fantastic thought. No. No. It was Roy whose mind was unbalanced, not me. Sparks flew . . . But how? Sparks fly with the wind, and the wind was from the east.

I stopped my spreading panic by sheer power of will. I wouldn't tell Roy about it. Unless his green brothers had already informed him of their work.

Once more I shook my head negatively. No use entertaining such crazy wish-thinking. Besides, I did not hate Filbrick to the point of wishing him to be burned out. It was Roy who might have entertained such thoughts, and they communicated themselves to me.

The intersensory perceptions theory allowed for that.

I was still trying to dig myself out from under the debris of my bewildered thoughts when I saw Filbrick, the remnants of his reddish hair sticking on end around his bald pate, placing a ladder by the smoked-over wall of his duplex.

"And my insurance lapsed,' he wailed, all his poise gone.

I looked at him scornfully. The damage did not seem much; a couple of work days would repair it.

He was in such a hurry to ascertain the amount of damage that he scampered up the ladder, holding to its side with only one hand. Suddenly I heard a shriek, and saw him falling off to the rock strewn ground.

After an ambulance took him to the nearest hospital, I stepped closer to the damaged house, where a group of curious neighbors discussed the accident.

"It looks like a perfectly sound ladder. It's brand new. Made of green wood. Not even painted . . ."

"Yes, but one rung is missing."

I looked at the ladder under discussion, and saw two holes where the missing rung had been. Dangling from one hole there hung a broken root; the smooth, round root of a cabbage-palm.

Filbrick must have mistaken it for a rung!

But how did it get there? How could it have tangled itself so precisely between the two holes of the missing rung? The thing was uncanny.

"Green brothers . . ." I repeated aimlessly. "Green brothers."

On my way to the post office to cash my pension check I stopped at Roy's nursery, to get his reaction to the accident. But I did not find him at his potting shed. A young Negro who helped him at times was watering the avacado seedlings. He grinned amiably when he saw me, and lifted his hand halfway to his damp, crinkly head in the indolent Southern salute.

"The boss's not here, Ma'am. He's settin' out them hibiscus Mrs. Watson bought off'n him last Friday."

So I continued on my way to the post office. After cashing the check and buying some groceries, I went to a pay telephone (I couldn't do that before, being stone broke) and dialed Mrs. Watson's number. I knew that she had an extension phone in her kitchen, and Roy wouldn't need to tramp over her pretty parquet floors with his always earth-soiled boots when called to answer me.

Mrs. Watson's maid summoned Roy. I heard his steps over the kitchen tiles, approaching the phone. They sounded sprightly, exhuberant. Usually he is inclined to shuffle.

"Filbrick fell off the roof," I told him, without mentioning the fire.

"And his houses have cracked walls, badly cracked. And he has five broken ribs," Roy said in the tone of a verdict.

This time I did not ask him how he knew.

"I've seen it with my green eye," he volunteered the weird explanation.

NEXT day I read a note in our only paper, relating the incident of the "freak fire." The reporter ended the story with: "The Victim Suffered Five Broken Ribs."

Filbrick left the hospital ten days later, bulging in the middle from the cast bandaging his set ribs. I saw him watching his workmen preparing to blast the holes for

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two septic tanks. As the burly Negro foreman ordered his men to cover the square of rocky ground with a blanket woven of heavy rope, they looked at each other apprehensively.

"I ain't makin' the contact," the biggest one muttered. This here place is haunted."

The foreman approached Filbrick, sitting in his open car.

"I'm sorry, Sah . . . . them niggers of mine got skeered. Would you mind startin' the blowin' up yourself?" He handed the builder the safety gadget with its long wire leading to the fuse, or whatever they call it.

Filbrick turned positively green. He shook his head. "You do it, man. What do I pay you for? Go to it, or I'll fire you."

The foreman took the electric gadget from Filbrick's shaking hands and turned away. He seemed to hesitate.

I was bending over my back flower bed, separating amaryllis, as an excuse to watch the proceedings. As my tired fingers rested in the soft damp soil, the truckload of which came only that morning, it felt good and comforting. Weird thoughts flitted through my brain.

How restful it would feel to have roots instead of aching, grubbing fingers, malformed with arthritis.

I shook the soil off my hand and looked once more in the direction of the foreman's retreating steps. I saw him making the sign of the cross furtively over his bare black chest. Then he shouted "All right!" and made the contact.

A low thud, and a cloud of smoke, was all that followed.

I sighed with relief. No accidents, as long as Filbrick was not touching it.

The last thought occurred to me as if whispered aloud by the voice of a rustling palm.

The tank was built, and covered with soil. The houses were painted. A large FOR SALE sign was tacked in front of them. But, despite the housing shortage, there were no buyers.

The brief breathing spell between the rains ended. High winds started. The hurricane season was upon us. But there was no hurricane scare as yet.

One wet evening in September I lay down on the couch on my sleeping porch for a brief afternoon nap. It always quieted my arthritic pains.

I was awakened by a hissing sound, as of steam boiling violently in a teapot. I cocked my ear toward the kitchen. No, I had left nothing on the stove. I went out there to make sure. The stove was dark. Carrying no fire insurance, I am very careful about such things, especially since mine is an old-fashioned kerosene stove.

But the hissing sound persisted. I looked out of the double kitchen window and saw Filbrick's houses in a swirl of coral-rock dust.

"A twister!" I gasped, recognizing the sound at last for what it really was.

I haven't heard it in a long time, as twisters are a rare occurrence in Florida.

THIS was a particularly freakish one. Every tree on my lot stood still, as did those on the other lots adjoining the new duplexes. But on Filbrick's lot the twister hissed and swirled with maniacal fury.

It was all over in a few minutes. Those terrible winds never last nearly as long as hurricanes do. When the dark mist dispersed, I saw block walls caved in, roofs torn from over them, newly planted saplings of melalukas and the FOR SALE sign, blown from the adjoining casuarina, resting like a snarled kite on the telephone wire.

"Serves him right," I said complacently, and went back to sleep.

But next day, awe replaced my complacent malice. Much as I hated Filbrick, I did not want him murdered.

Yet here it was: They found him in one of his duplexes, lying among the weeds which already sprouted among the cracked cement blocks, his face purple, his eyes staring. A stout stem of moonflower vine, otherwise known as shoestring vine, was wound twice around his swollen neck.

The police investigator who came to the place of death, followed by a gaping crowd which included me, repeated, shaking his head:

"That vine could not have strangled him by its own free will. Someone helped it . . . Now, folks, tell me who hated the guy enough to wish him dead?"

People shook their heads in silence. There

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were many who hated Filbrick, who paid starvation wages and fired his men at the slightest provocation. There were the men he had swindled . . . Many suspects.

I knew of other, non-human suspects. A multitude of them. But I could not name green brothers without being suspect myself—of insanity.

I stared at the still uncovered body in morbid fascination. I even put on my seldom worn glasses, to see better. Finally, ashamed of myself, I jerked them off.

After the coroner announced the result of his preliminary examination, and the covered body was being carried to the ambulance, I heard Roy's voice shouting:

"I knew he would die! I knew it!"

There was sinister triumph in his voice.

I shuddered. Roy was endangering himself. Nobody would believe this raving about retribution. Green brothers? Even the secretly superstitious people, especially those on the police force, would never agree with his outlandish theory.

Roy hated Filbrick. He was the natural suspect at the moment.

To add to the danger, he tore himself out of the detaining hands of the policeman who wanted to question him and ran toward his nursery, his bushy gray hair flying in the gentle eastern breeze.

The police went after him. He would not go far. They might shoot him. I shuddered when I thought of it. And of course I could do nothing. Nothing but strain my brain trying to figure out what would happen next.

I hated to see Roy captured or dead. After all, I'd known him and his friendliness for over thirty years. Or was it forty, or fifty, or a hundred? All of a sudden, time ceased. I stood still, frozen by fear and horror.

FOR inadvertantly. I had approached my crystal ball, and was peering into it almost against my will. It was as if some compelling hand—a green hand—kept my eyes on a level with the turmoil in its center.

I heard the shots. Then I saw the police milling around Roy. He stood erect, apparently unhurt. Unhurt—in the crystal ball. But in reality?

I peered closer. What I saw raised goosepimples over my weary flesh.

I seemed to stand very close to Roy. So close that I could see small bumps raising on his skin. "He has an attack of hives again," I thought with fleeting pity. What were hives compared to what hurt him now?

But my eyes continued to stare at those bumps. There was something strange about them. They were not reddish as usual. As they grew in size, their greenness turned to brownish white.

They were growing. No longer were they bumps, but elongated tentacles. No. Not tentacles. Roots!

He jerked violently out of the hands of his captors, like a heavy tree falling to the cry of "TIMBER!"

The crystal clouded for a moment. When it cleared, I saw policemen searching the driveway. But they could not find Roy.

But I could find him: in a grassy spot, where a silver oak used to stand—mighty—fallen in the last hurricane. There stood another silver oak, its great crown silver gray, resembling a mane of gray hair.

I looked closer. Near the ground a small stephnoatis was reaching up around the trunk. Young as the vine was it was already blooming, its large waxy bells lifted up to the sun. I even seemed to smell the heavenly fragrance of that vine, reminiscent of orange blossoms.

I wondered only for a moment. Then I remembered. Roy's bride had died young.

NATURALLY they never found Roy. Officially he is a fugitive from justice. His ex-customers do not remember how many oaks shaded his driveway . . . I do.

Filbrick's lots are in ruins. Weeds and young saplings grow there, speedily, like an invading green army.

Green brothers took over!

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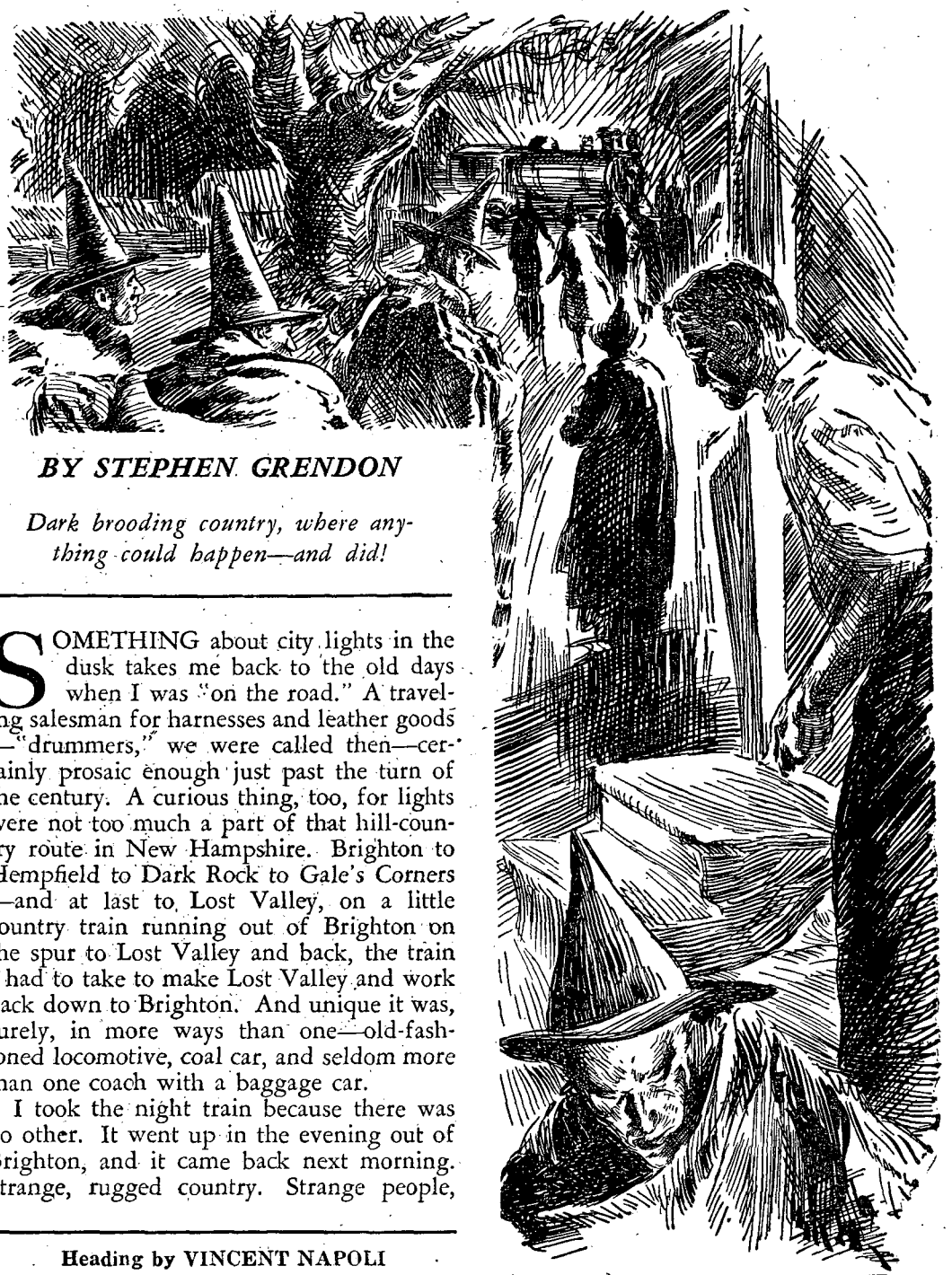
The Night Train to Lost Valley



BY STEPHEN GRENDON

Dark brooding country, where anything could happen—and did!

SOMETHING about city lights in the dusk takes me back to the old days when I was "on the road." A traveling salesman for harnesses and leather goods—"drummers," we were called then—certainly prosaic enough just past the turn of the century. A curious thing, too, for lights were not too much a part of that hill-country route in New Hampshire. Brighton to Hempfield to Dark Rock to Gale's Corners—and at last to Lost Valley, on a little country train running out of Brighton on the spur to Lost Valley and back, the train I had to take to make Lost Valley and work back down to Brighton. And unique it was, surely, in more ways than one—old-fashioned locomotive, coal car, and seldom more than one coach with a baggage car.

I took the night train because there was no other. It went up in the evening out of Brighton, and it came back next morning. Strange, rugged country. Strange people,

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too—uncommonly dark, and in many ways primitive—not backward, exactly, I would never have called them that, but given to certain old ways not frequently encountered even in the first decade of the century, when vestiges of the 1890's still lingered in widely scattered areas of the country. But beautiful country, for all its strangeness: that could not be gainsaid. Dark, brooding country, much wooded, with startling vistas opening up before one's eyes on the morning trip down out of Lost Valley.

I used to wonder why the spur had been run to Lost Valley, unless the town had given greater promise when the railroad was put through—a promise clearly never fulfilled, for it was small, its houses clustered close together with many trees, even in its main street—trees of great size, so that it was apparent that boardwalks had been built around them. The dusty roads too, wound in and out among the trees. But, being in the heart of agricultural country, however sparsely settled, it supported a large harness shop, so that it was important to get into Lost Valley for the seasonal order.

The train used to wait on a siding in Brighton, steam up, ready to pull away. Sometimes, when people went down to Concord for an inauguration or for just a shopping trip, the single coach had to expand to two, and both were filled; but usually there were few people to make the trip all the way up to Lost Valley—about seventy miles or thereabouts, and quite often, considering the relatively few times I made the trip, I was the only passenger—sharing the train with the conductor, the brakeman, the engineer and a fireman, with all of whom I grew quite friendly in the course of time, since the train's personnel did not change much in a decade.

THE conductor, Jem Watkins, was an old fellow, lean and a little bent, with a sharp, wry humor which fitted in somehow with his small bright eyes and his thin goatee. I knew him better than the others, for often on the twenty-odd miles between Gale's Corners and Lost Valley, he came in and sat to talk. The brakeman did this too, on those occasions when I was the sole passenger. A tall, saturnine individual named Toby Colter, he never had much to say, but he could become enthusiastic about the weather, and he seemed to have an inexhaustible store of anecdotes concerning the weather in the vicinity of Lost Valley. Abner Pringle, the engineer, and Sib Whately, the fireman, I knew less well. I had a hailing knowledge of them, so to speak, and little more, but they were always friendly. They were all four hill-country men, all, in fact, from Lost Valley or its vicinity, and they were filled with the lore of that country.

Strange lore—strange with the strangeness of alliance to old things, to old customs long since forgotten. To what extent they were forgotten in Lost Valley I have since had more than one occasion to wonder, though there is not much doubt but that I would never have thought of any kinship at all between the town and the old customs if it had not been for my last trip to Lost Valley. It is always of that last trip and what happened that night that I come to think, finally, perplexed, unsure, and filled with a kind of amazed wonder still. Everything else—the trip up and back, the long talks with Jem Watkins and Toby Colter, the people of the town, the big orders placed in Lost Valley, even to a large extent the wild beauty of the scenery—ultimately falls into the general pattern of reminiscence, but not the last trip to Lost Valley.

Yet, vivid as it is, there is always an element of doubt. Did it, after all, really happen? Or was it a dream? For it had the quality of a dream, beyond question, and it had the hazy after-effect of a dream. Things sometimes happen to a man which are so far out of the ordinary that he tends inevitably to discredit his senses. Conversely, dreams of such realism sometimes take place that a man deliberately seeks some supporting evidence to convince himself of their reality. Dream or reality, it does not matter. Something happened that night in Lost Valley, something of which the train and the men on it and I myself were an integral part, something which left in memory an abiding wonder and a chaotic confusion, and which might have had a meaning of which I have never cared—or dared—to think.

I knew it was to be my last trip, since I

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was going into office work; so that the event was in itself unusual. And then, too, the train—for once in the decade I had taken it—set out ahead of time. It was unprecedented, and if I had not been at the station in Brighton fully half an hour early, I would have missed the train and would have had to go to Lost Valley on the following day. I have often wondered whether what happened to me that night, would have taken place the following night.

The early starting of the train was only the beginning of the curious events of that night. For one thing, when I waved at Abner Pringle, on my way past the locomotive to the single coach, I was startled to see an expression of almost ludicrous consternation upon his usually placid features, and he returned my wave with half-hearted reluctance.

His reaction was so unexpected that before I had gone ten steps, I was convinced that I had imagined it. But I had not, for at sight of me, Jem Watkins likewise looked by turns unpleasantly surprised and dismayed.

"Mr. Wilson," he said in an uncertain voice.

"You don't look glad to see me, and that's a fact, Jem," I said.

"You're makin' the trip—tonight?"

I had climbed into the coach by this time, Jem Watkins after me, with his conductor's cap in one hand and the other scratching his head.

"I'm late this year, I know it," I said. "But I'm making the trip." I looked at him, and he at me; I could not get away from the conviction that I was the last person Jem Watkins expected or wanted to see. "But if you don't want to take me, Jem, why, say so."

Jem swallowed; the Adam's-apple of that scrawny neck moved up and down. "Couldn't you go up tomorrow?"

"Tonight," I said. "I'll tell you something. It's my last trip."

"Your last trip?" he echoed in a weak voice. "You mean—you're stayin' with us up there?"

"Well, no, not exactly. I've been transferred to the office. You'll have a new man hereafter, and I hope you'll treat him as nice as you always treated me."

STRANGELY, it seemed that the conductor was slightly mollified at the news that this was to be my last trip; I had thought, perhaps in some vanity, that he might regret it. Yet he was not wholly pleased, and perhaps nothing would have pleased him but that I descend and leave him and his train go along up to Lost Valley without me. Perhaps in other circumstances I might have done so, despite my feeling at a loss to account for my reception; but now, with promotion just ahead, I did not want to waste a minute in getting over with my last tasks as a salesman. So I settled myself, and tried to appear unconcerned about the curious way in which Jem Watkins stood there in the aisle of the coach, turning his hat in his hands, this way and that, and not knowing just what to say.

"The people up there are pretty busy this time of the year," he said finally. "I don't know whether it wouldn't be best to send in by mail for your order from Mr. Darby."

"And miss saying good-bye to him?" I said. "Mr. Darby wouldn't like that."

Jem Watkins retreated, baffled, after a hurried look at his watch, and in a few moments the train pulled out of the station, just four minutes short of half an hour ahead of time. Since I was the only passenger, I knew Jem would be back; we had hardly gone two miles beyond Brighton, when he came walking into the car, and Toby Colter was with him, both of them looking uneasy and grim.

"We talked it over," said Jem slowly, while Toby nodded portentously, "and we kind of figured you might like to stay in Gale's Corners tonight and come in to Lost Valley in the morning."

I laughed at this; it seemed so ingenuous. "Come now, Jem, it's to Lost Valley I'm going, and no other place. Gale's Corners in the morning, remember? We've done it twice a year for ten years, and you've never thought of changing before."

"But this year you're late, Mr. Wilson," said Toby.

"That I am. And if I don't hurry now, I won't be back in Boston by the second. Let me see, it's April thirtieth today, and I've got to run into Gainesville before I head back to Boston. I can just make it"

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"You won't see Mr. Darby tonight," said Jem.

"Why not?"

"Because he won't be there, that's why."

"Well, then, I'll see him in the morning." But I thought with regret that I would not be sitting around that old-fashioned stove in the harness-shop spending the evening in the kind of trivial talk which is the very stuff of life in country places.

Jem took my ticket and punched it, and Toby, after a baffled glance at me, left the car. Jem seemed resigned now. He sat looking out to the fleeting landscape; the last of the sun was drawing off the land, and out of the east, in the pockets among the hills, a blue and purple haze that was twilight was gathering. We were perhaps ten miles out of Brighton and already drawing near to Hempfield. And by that time I was filled with the strangeness of this ride —with everything about it, from the unexpected early start to the conductor's incredible attitude.

THE country through which we were traveling was one of increasing wildness, and at this hour especially beautiful, for the last sunlight still tipped the hilltops, and the darkness of dusk welled up from the valleys, while the sky overhead was a soft blue of unparalleled clarity, against which the few small cirrus clouds were a startling white. It was that hour of the day during which the face of heaven and of earth changed with singular rapidity, so that in a few moments the clouds which had been white, were peach, and in a few more, crimson on the under side and old rose on top, and soon lavender, while the blue of the sky became dark overhead, and changed to aquamarine and amethyst above the lemon and turquoise of the afterglow. The train moved into the west, and I watched the ever-changing world outside the coach with a pleasure all the deeper and more appreciative for the knowledge that perhaps I would never again be viewing this particular scene.

The route to Lost Valley went steadily into hill country, and up to just beyond Gale's Corners by four miles or thereabouts, the railroad was an almost imperceptible up-grade; then, sixteen miles or so this side of Lost Valley, the down-grade began, though it was not the equivalent of the previous up-grade, so that clearly Lost Valley lay in a little pocket of the higher hills beyond Gale's Corners. We stopped briefly at Hempfield, apparently for the debouching of mail, and went on again without further interruption. I had made an effort to look out of the window to notice whether the station-agent at Hempfield was at all surprised at the train's early arrival, but if he was, he did not show it. The conductor had leaned out of the window and passed the time of the evening with him, opining that it would be a clear night, and then again resumed his seat opposite me, from which he glanced at me with a kind of helpless dubiousness from time to time.

His unnatural uncommunicativeness troubled me eventually. "Jem," I said, "how has old Mrs. Perkins been? She was quite sick last time I was up."

"Oh, she's dead, Mr. Wilson," said Jem, nodding his head lugubriously. "Died in February."

"Too bad. And how's that crippled baby of Beales?"

"Poorly, Mr. Wilson, poorly." He gave me a curious look just then, a very curious look, and for a moment I had the idea that he was about to say something; but evidently he thought better of it, for he did not speak, except to say, "Poorly," again.

"I'm sorry not to see Mr. Darby tonight," I went on. "I enjoy sitting around that stove with the old-timers who come in."

Jem said nothing.

"What would he be doing tonight?"

"Why, round about this time he finishes his winter work, as you'd ought to know, Mr. Wilson, and he's pretty busy tottin' up his books and gettin' things in order."

"That's so," I said, "but I've seen him at that earlier in April than this, and he never closed up shop for it then."

"Mr. Darby's gittin' old," said Jem, with unexpected vehemence.

THOSE were his last words until we were past Gale's Corners, and then he spoke only in answer to my perplexed comment that none of the station-agents along the route had shown any surprise at the train's being almost three-quarters of an hour

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early, for it had accelerated its speed considerably since leaving Brighton.

"We're usually ahead of time this time of year," said Jem. And once more there was that curious, baffled glance—as if he thought I knew something I was not telling, and wished that I would say it, and clear the air.

Soon then we came into sight of Lost Valley—or what, in the gathering darkness, I knew to be Lost Valley: a cluster of lights, not many, for there were not more than thirty buildings in the hamlet, and it existed not so much because of the people who lived within its limits as it did because of those people back in the hills who did their trading there. Then we drew up at the station, and there was old Henry Pursley bent over the telegraph key with the yellow light of his lamp-lit room streaming out to the station platform: a cozy scene and one of pleasant warmth.

But I had no sooner stepped down from the train into the light than he looked up and saw me; and instead of the customary greeting I expected, his jaw dropped, and he sat staring at me, and then, accusingly, it seemed, at Jem. Only then did he greet me, soberly, and, coming out, spoke in a low voice to Jem, which sounded as if he were berating Jem for forgetting something.

I went up along the street away from the station, and, seeing that Darby's Harness Shop was indeed dark, I crossed over to the one two-story house in town, that of the widowed Mrs. Emerson and her daughter, Angeline, where I was accustomed to staying. And there, too, I was greeted with the same consternation and surprise, and for a moment it seemed that for once the door of the house would be closed against me, but then Angeline, a tall, dark girl, with black eyes and a flame-like mark under one ear, opened the door and invited me in.

"You're late this spring, Mr. Wilson," she said.

I admitted it. "But it's my last trip," I explained, and told them why.

Mrs. Emerson looked at me shrewdly. "You've not eaten, Mr. Wilson. You look dissatisfied."

I felt dissatisfied and would have gone on to tell them why, if it were not that I felt they, too, would say nothing to me, for, after all, I was an outsider, and in all small towns, even in less secluded places, a man from "outside" does not gain the confidence of villagers for years, sometimes as many as twenty or more. I admitted that I had not eaten.

"Then you'll have to eat, Mr. Wilson."

"I wouldn't think of troubling you, thank you, Mrs. Emerson."

Mrs. Emerson, however, would hear of nothing but that Angeline must at once prepare food, and she herself brought me a bitter-tasting tea which, she said, she had brewed of bergamotte and mint; and it did have a minty aroma, though it tasted more bitter than minty, and I took the opportunity, when the women were both out of the sitting room for a moment, of pouring the brew into a pot containing a large fern, prayerfully hoping that no harm would come to the fern. I had drunk enough, in any case, to leave an unpleasant taste in my mouth, about which I complained to Mrs. Emerson as soon as she appeared, whereupon she immediately produced a piece of old-fashioned sweet chocolate.

"I thought might be you wouldn't care for it too much, but it's good for you just the same. But this'll take the taste of it away."

SO IT did. And the meal itself, which was a good and ample one, did more—it made me realize that, what with all the rushing about of the day in Brighton and on the way there, I was tired. The hour was nine o'clock, and, while it was by no means late, it was to bed I wanted to go. Thereupon, with all the customary show of hospitality I had come to expect of my hostesses in the years past, I was shown to my room.

Once abed, I fell asleep with unusual alacrity.

From that point on, I cannot be sure that what happened was reality. It may have been dream. But there were subsequently certain disquieting factors, which, pieced together, pointed to conclusions wholly outside my small world—though I had never before realized how small that world was. What happened may have been a powerful, transcendent dream. It may not.

It began with my waking. I woke suddenly with a headache and the taste of Mrs. Emerson's bitter tea strong and hot in my

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mouth. Intending to go for water, I got up, put on my trousers, shoes, and shirt, and went downstairs, feeling my way in the dark. Before I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was aware of a commotion outside the house, and, pausing to look out, I saw an extraordinary movement of people in the direction of the railroad station, and then, peering up the street, I saw that the train—the night train to Lost Valley on which I had come—was standing, steam up, at the station. But, most strange of all, the people I saw were clad in conical hats and black cloaks; some of them carried torches, and some did not.

I turned and struck a match, and by its light I saw that a trunk under the stair had been thrown open, clothing taken out, and everything left as it was, as if someone had been in great haste to get away. Among the pieces there was a black cloak, and a conical hat, which I divined to be the property of the late Mr. Emerson. I stood for a moment looking down at them; then the match went out.

What was it out there in the streets? Where were all these people going? Men, women, and children—it seemed as if the entire population of Lost Valley was deserting the town.

I reached down in the dark and touched the black cloak. I lifted it and set it on my shoulders, drawing it tight around my neck; it swathed me from neck to toe. I took up the conical hat and put it on, and saw that it provided a kind of masking fold for the face as well.

Then, acting on an extraordinary impulse, I opened the door and went out to join the thronging people.

ALL were going to the train, and all were boarding the train. But the train was headed away from the only direction it could take out of Lost Valley, and it stood not quite at the station, but a little beyond it, and beyond the turntable where it customarily turned around to make the morning trip down to Brighton. The coach was not lit, but the light from the fire-box and the glare of a half-dozen torches held by men mounted on the locomotive made a weird illumination in a night dark save for the locomotive's headlight pointed to the woods ahead. And, looking in that direction, I was startled to see what must have been newly laid, but not new tracks, leading away into the dark hills beyond Lost Valley.

So much I saw before mounting into the unlit coach, which was crowded with silent people. Then nothing more. No light flared in the crowded coach. No one spoke. The silence was unbelievable, no word sounded, no human voice was heard save once the cry of a baby I could not see. Nor was the coach alone filled; so was the baggage car, and so, too, was the coal car. People clung to the train, from the locomotive to the rear platform—a great, silent throng, the entire populatioin of Lost Valley, bent on a mission in the dead of night, for the hour surely approached midnight, judging by the stars overhead, and the position of the gibbous moon which hung yellow low in the eastern sky. There was an extraordinary feeling of excitement, of tension, and of wonder in the coach, and I too began to feel it in the increased beating of my pulse, and in a kind of apprehensive exhilaration caught from my hooded and cloaked companions.

Without bell or whistle-sound, the train set out, drawing away from the deserted village into the dark hills. I tried to estimate how far we went—I thought not farther than seven miles. But we passed under arched trees of great age, through glens and narrow valleys, past murmurous brooks, past mourning whippoorwills and owls, into a veritable kingdom of night, before the train slowed to a stop, and at once everyone aboard began to get out, still wordless and tense. But this time the torch-bearers took the lead, and certain others pushed up to be right behind them, while others waited patiently to fall into line, and I myself, fearful lest some regular order be imposed upon the throng, waited until last, and then fell into step beside another hooded man, who, I felt sure, could be none other than Abner Pringle, for only he had such girth and height.

They did not go far, but, coming suddenly to an open space, the torch-bearers alone went forward and ranged themselves below a strange stone image—or was it an image? The light flickered so and danced upon the stone there in the wood, I could not be sure; yet it seemed to be an image,

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and presently all who had gone before me were prostrate on the ground before the stone, and there remained, myself among them, until those who had walked directly behind the torch-bearers rose and began a slow, rhythmic dancing, while another of them walked directly to the foot of the stone and began to chant in a voice I felt sure was Mr. Darby's. Latin, by sound of it—but not pure Latin, for mixed with it was a gibberish I could not understand. Nor could I hear enough of the Latin to know what it was that was being said. A calling upon God, certainly. But what God? No Christian God in this place, for no Christian hand had touched that curious stone and the altar-like approach to it. If indeed it was an altar. Some hand had cut away the trees there, and someone had kept the grass down in that place. And there was something about the "fruits of the earth and something more about Ahriman" and something about the "Gift" (or "gifts") to come.

Then, suddenly, a blue flame shone before the stone, and at sight of it the prostrate ones rose to their feet and began a wild dance to music coming from somewhere—a piping of fluted notes, which burst forth into the dark night like the startled voices of the forest's habitants themselves—music which grew wilder and wilder, as the dancers did, also—and I, too, for I was seized by a compulsion I could not struggle against, and I danced among them, sometimes alone, sometimes with someone—once, I am sure, with Angeline, in a wild, sensuous rout. The music mounted to a powerful crescendo, and on every side people screamed and chanted strange unintelligible words, and the dancing became more and more abandoned, until, as abruptly as it had begun, the music stopped.

At that instant, the celebrant before the stone stepped forward, bent and took up something there, tore away its covering, raised it high, whirling it thrice around his head, and dashed it to the stone, where its cry was stilled. What was it? What manner of creature had been sacrificed there? It seemed unfurred, unfeathered, too. White and unclothed. *A baby?*

A great sigh rose up. Then silence. The blue flame at the stone flickered, turned to green, to red, and began to subside.

The torch-bearers started to file away from the stone, and the hooded celebrants waited to fall in line after them, though the master of the ceremony had been joined by two others, and all three were now bent about the base of the stone, while the others made their silent way back to the waiting train.

There we waited, again in unbroken silence, until all were once more on board, clinging to all sides of the train, filling every space. Then the train started up again, backing down to Lost Valley from which it had come away an hour or more before. How long I could not say. Time seemed to have no meaning in this eldritch night, but the moon was far higher than it had been. Two hours perhaps. Though it seemed incredible that we had been away so long.

I had wisely taken my place near to the door of the coach, so that I could make my escape quickly, get back to the house, remove my cloak and hood, and be in my room before Mrs. Emerson and Angeline returned. So I slipped away from the train and lost myself in the shadows. When the door opened and closed for the two women, I was once again in bed.

BUT had I ever left that bed?

I woke up tired, true. But I woke up to Lost Valley as I had always known it. When had my dream begun?

At the breakfast table, Mrs. Emerson asked whether the tea had agreed with me.

I told her it had not.

"Nor with me, either. It gave me a headache," she said. "And such a taste!"

"Well, nobody caught *me* drinking it," said Angeline.

I went over the harness shop, and there was August Darby, just as hale and hearty as ever, just as friendly. A jovial fellow, fat-cheeked, Teutonic in his looks, with a full mustache and merry eyes.

"Heard you were in town last night. Man, why didn't you come to the house? I was there. Worked on my books till one o'clock," he said. His smile was fresh, guileless, innocent. "But today—I'm tired. I'm getting old."

He had a large order for me, and he made it larger before I left, after he found out he might not see me again.

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I made a point of walking in the vicinity of the railroad station.

There were no tracks leading to the woods beyond the town. Nothing. There was no sign that any tracks had ever been there. The train was turned and waiting, and, seeing me go by, Jem Watkins called out, "Hey there, Mr. Wilson—you nearly ready?"

"Just about," I said.

I turned and went back into the village and stopped at Beales' house. I knocked on the door and Mrs. Beale came to answer, with her husband standing not far behind. Strange! He looked as if he had been crying. Red-eyes, bitter mouthed. He stood a moment, and then was gone, backing away somewhere out of my sight.

"Hello, Mrs. Beale. How's the baby?"

She looked at me with a most extraordinary expression in her eyes. She glanced down, and I did too. She was carrying folded baby clothes.

"Not well," she said. "Not well at all, Mr. Wilson. I'm afraid it won't be long."

"May I see her?"

She looked at me for a long moment. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Wilson. She's sleeping. It's been a hard time getting her to sleep."

"I'm sorry," I said.

I bade her good-bye and stepped away. But not before I had seen what she had been about when I knocked. Folding and wrapping baby clothes, a lot of them, and putting them away—not in a bureau—but in a trunk there in the front room.

I WENT over to the station and got into the train. From the window I took a last look at Lost Valley. When you come into a town as most drummers do, you take the town for granted, and sometimes you never notice things which other travelers might see at once. Like, for instance, churches. In ten years' time I had never noticed it—but now I did. There was no church of any kind in Lost Valley.

Anyone would say that is a small point—and it is. How many small points does it take to make a big one, I wonder? I ask myself how long it would take to lay seven miles of track, and I know it couldn't be done in a night. No, not in two nights. But then, it needn't be done in that time, not at all. Tracks could have been laid there for years, and all that needed to be done was perhaps a quarter of a mile from the station to just past the woods' edge out of sight. And afterwards, it could be taken up again, and easily, and stored away once more.

And in backward places like Lost Valley—little towns no one ever sees except such casual travelers like myself, and then but briefly, overnight—there are all kinds of primitive survivals, I understand. Perhaps even witchcraft, or more ancient lore which has to do with human sacrifice to some dark alien God to propitiate him and thus assure the earth's fertility. Nobody knows what happens in such places. But most of them, unlike Lost Valley, have at least one church.

I remembered afterward that April thirtieth was Walpurgis Eve. And everyone along the Brighton-Lost Valley line seemed to understand that on that day the train set out earlier than its scheduled time.

Where does a dream begin? Where does it end? For that matter, what about reality? That, too, begins and ends. Plainly, on the way back, Jem Watkins and Toby Colter, for all their chattering talk, were tired. I could not imagine Jem's goatlike capering by torch-light. Nor Toby's clumsiness either. And Mr. Darby! Who else had a voice like him? None that I knew—but then, I did not know everyone in Lost Valley. Darby and Mrs. Emerson tired, too. But he had been up late working on his accounts, and she had spent a sleepless night because of bitter tea. Or had they?

Whose dream had I been in? Mine—or theirs?

Perhaps I would never have doubted that it was a dream had it not been for that visit I paid to Beales. Even the sight of the baby clothes being folded and put away, set against that vivid memory of what had been flung in sacrifice against that silent stone thing in the woods, would not alone have given me the doubt I had. But on the way down, while Jem obligingly, as always, held his train at the stations, on the spur to Brighton, while I got out and got my orders from the local harness shops, I thought about it, and at last, getting back on the train at Hempfield for the final jog to Brighton, I spoke about Beales' baby.

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"I meant to call and see Beales' baby," I began.

Jem cut me off, loquaciously. "Good thing you didn't, Mr. Wilson. That poor little thing died in the night. You'd like to've upset them."

But at Beales' it had been sleeping less than two hours ago. Here in the sunny coach the baby in Jem's words was dead in the night. Was this, after all, the same dark train which played its part in some ancient, woodland rite? A country train—worn locomotive, coal-car, baggage car, and creaking coach, making its run once daily up to Lost Valley, and once daily back. And in the night did it always rest quietly at the station at Lost Valley? Or did it, once a year, on Walpurgis Eve, make a secret sally into darkness?

I bade the train good-bye at Brighton. I said good-bye to Jem and Toby, Abner and Sib, who shook my hand as if I had been a lifelong friend. But somehow, I was never quite fully able to say good-bye to Lost Valley. It stayed just out of sight on the perimeter of consciousness, ready to reappear in the mind's eye at a moment's urging, at any casual thing that stirred memory. Like a country train on a little spur.

I HEARD about Lost Valley indirectly once after that.

It was at a Cambridge party—one of those gatherings which include a wide variety of people. I was passing a little group on my way to the punch-bowl, when I heard Lost Valley mentioned. I turned. I recognized the speaker: Jeffrey Kinnan, a brilliant young Harvard man, a sociologist, and I listened.

"Genetically, Lost Valley is most interesting. Apparently there has been inbreeding there for generations. We should soon find an increasing number of degenerates in that vicinity. In genetics . . ."

I walked away. Genetics, indeed! Something that was old before Mendel was a mote in the cosmos. I could have spoken, too, but how could I be sure? Was it a dream or not? Certainly, wrapped up in his genetics, Kinnan would have called it a nightmare.

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The Frightened Engineer

THE motorist was pleased with his shiny black sedan. It was new, within a week to be exact, and he congratulated himself as he headed into the feed road that led to the new Transstate Turnpike that he hadn't had to slip in several hundred dollars as extra "bonus" for the vehicle.

Too, it was a nice day. The kind of sparkling clear early winter morning on which a drive anywhere, and certainly along a perfectly engineered and scenic highway, is a joy for the most jaundiced veteran of the wheel.

It was this overall feeling of self-satisfaction and contentment, probably, that caused the driver to do something he rarely, under any circumstances, would consider. Still, the man by the side of the road had a workman's honest face. The shiny car slowed and stopped and the ride-thumber, a man in his early fifties with a tanned face, jumped in mumbling thanks. The motorist shifted gears, enjoying the surge of power as the automobile sped from the ramp into the three-lane smoothness of the turnpike.

Not more than a few minutes had passed before the passenger said, "Thanks a lot, mister."

Already the motorist was doubting his generosity, for the hitchhiker had brought into the car with him the unmistakable and strong odor of liquor. A sidelong glance revealed that the man had been drinking.

That only goes to show you it's a bad practice to pick hikers up. Once you do, you can't stop suddenly and say, "I've changed my mind. I'd like you to get out." Especially when your passenger's been drinking. That's when you get the nasty experiences. Oh well, the motorist philosophized. He had only a hundred miles or so to travel on the pike. That would take considerably less than two hours.

THE passenger had something on his mind, and by nature he was obviously loquacious. A loquacious man with a few drinks aboard needs very little encouragement.

"I helped build this highway," he announced. "Yup." He looked across the trim grass divide and squinted up the white concrete stretch ahead.

The motorist pricked up his ears. There was no telling. Maybe this guy had worked on the pike.

"It was no easy job," the workman wagged his head. "It took a lotta men to do it includin' the greatest engineer of 'em all. Didja ever hear of him? Angus Mullen?"

The name was vaguely familiar. It was associated with a bridge or a skyscraper.

"Had to get Mullen in before they were through, they did," he confided, "an' it was all ta do with Hill 96!"

The way he said it, with the brightness of the morning and the sunshine, it was ominous nevertheless.

"Old Hill 96," the 'hiker mused, almost as though to himself, but there was a look in his eyes the motorist with a quick glance ascertained that had nothing to do with imbibing.

"It's up at the other end," he continued. "You know the idea on these here highways. Keep her straight. Make all your curves gradual."

The motorist had decided by this time that his companion was far from drunk. He'd had some all right but he was evidently not drunk in the real sense of the word. His speech was coherent. It made sense, at least it seemed to——

"Ya don't do much in the way of going

How do we know what is down there, deep . . . inside the earth?

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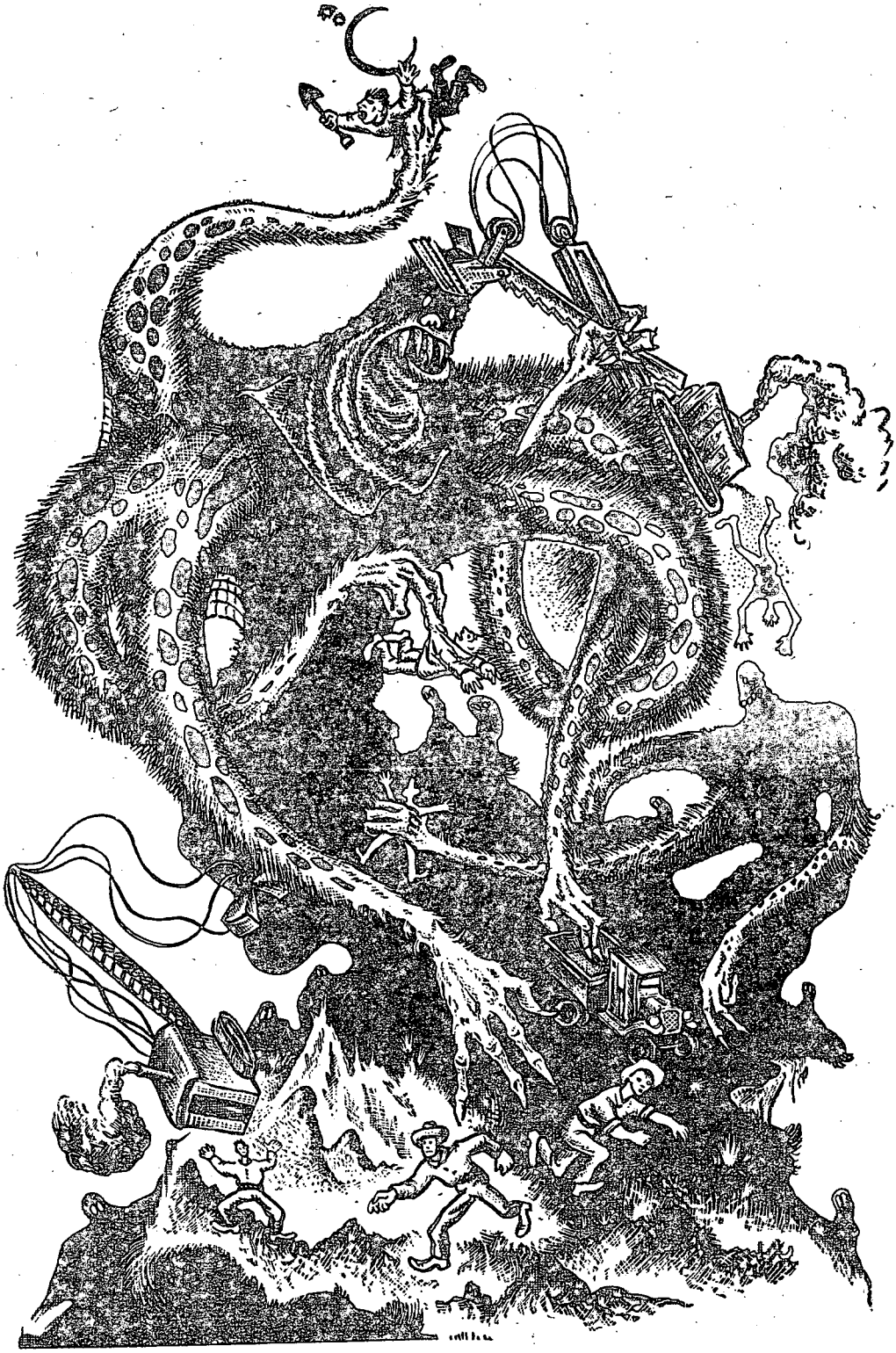
BY ALLISON V. HARDING



Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

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down inta valleys or up over hills," the ex-construction worker advised. "Ya build your valleys up to road level; ya cut your hills down. Ya go through 'em! So it's a constant business of blastin', cuttin', levelin'. That's the tough part, mister. Anyone can lay the cement on, ya know, after the gradin's been done. Hill 96? That was the headache on this whole job. That's what I'm gonna tell ya about.

"See, I was in on the buildin' of this Trans-state Turnpike from the beginning. I was there, mister, up at the near end the day the governor came out and they handed him a shovel and he took the first dig. Ya know those ceremonies. Oh, that was a long time before Angus Mullen came on the scene. You wouldn't think a highway would need the services of the biggest-shot engineer in the country, would ya, and certainly nobody thought so in the beginning.

"Things went swimmingly for a while. And then? Then we came to Hill 96. Ya see, we number these things. There's valley this number and hill that number. We were a few days ahead of schedule when we hit old 96. Now she didn't look tough from a distance. Not even much of a hill and nice and gentle lookin' with a lot of greenness and shrubbery and trees. The plans called for the road to blast right through the middle of it. Fac', it seemed too bad. Sometimes even a construction worker feels bad about fillin' up a nice glen or rammin' through what was once somebody's property, but if the plans call for it, you do it, and anyway the men who go aroun' buyin' up for the right of way get the real headaches. That's not our problem.

"But Hill 96 sure was—with a vengeance. Ya see, 96 didn't take to us kindly. 96 wouldn't be blasted. 96 wouldn't be leveled!"

THE public ride on a spanking new highway, sometimes admires it, rarely thinks of it as a splendid engineering feat, never considers the many construction difficulties that had to be overcome in the making. Joe Creel, construction foreman, on the new Trans-state highway contemplated that between puffs on a cigar and looks at map blueprints.

"Let 'em take their shiny autos and come over here now," he grumbled to himself. "Let 'em worry about bulldozing and gettin' the dynamite up front fast enough and the waste carted away."

As his father had said to him once years ago when Joe had evinced an interest in following in the paternal footsteps, "Construction is tough, Joe. You waste time plannin' against things that never happen, and most the time you're held up by what you didn't expect—and couldn't help even if you did!"

Still, I shouldn't kick, Creel thought to himself. So you put on dirty clothes and sometimes from a distance nobody can tell you from a ditch-digger but it's a good living, a mighty good living, and he liked working with the land. He liked the feel of earth or rock beneath him. He liked building Nature's patterns to man's and he liked the finished product, the highway, just long enough to keep him contented until he could look around and find something else to do.

And so the Trans-state rolled like a great brown snake at first, a swathe through the countryside, taking trees and hills and valleys in its stride, and dressing its tail up as the boys back down the line poured concrete into the molds, preparing for the final finished surface that would speed cars safely at sixty and seventy miles an hour across the country.

They were three or four days ahead of schedule to the county border when Ed Foley, lantern-jawed, square built, reliable, with whom Creel had worked before, lumbered into the temporary shed that never spent two straight nights, Joe thought satisfiedly, resting on the same piece of God's earth.

"Joe," said Foley. (These two had known each other long enough to be on first-name basis) "We've run into just a little bit of a problem up ahead."

The construction foreman looked up. "I thought we figgered it would be clear sailin' to the river. That Timms' Valley, maybe? I figgered the bottom belly might be kinda soft. Take up more to fill her solid?"

"You're still in a horse and buggy," Foley replied with pride. "We're way beyond Timms'. Guess ya haven't been out today yet."

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Creel shook his head. "What is it then?"

"Hill 96."

Joe consulted his maps, identified the spot with a thick finger. "That it?"

Foley looking over his shoulder, nodded.

"Funny," mused Creel half aloud. "Supposed to be more an earth mound than a real hill. Soft stuff. Didn't figger dynamite on that. Is that what's wrong, Ed? You need dynamite?" The other man crinkled up his broad freckled brow.

"It's not that, Chief. 96 is soft. Why, ya could take the stuff out with shovels and wheelbarrows."

"Well?"

"I don't get it," Foley said. "I'm sure I've been figgerin' right, but the more we take away, the more there is! It's like the hill didn't wanna give up!"

Creel snorted. But no armchair construction foreman, he, and within the hour he was standing with Ed Foley just below 96 watching the thundering, groaning shovels attack it, their tooth-lined scoops steam-driven into the soft rich-looking earth. Drive, scoop, swivel, dump. And then repeat, over and over.

"Looks okay," Creel shouted over the din.

"Sure," Foley said dubiously. "Looks okay. But c-mon over here and just look at this stuff."

THEY walked to the first slow rise of 96. There from the trucks hurrying up and down the incline, some of the earth from the heart of the hill itself had spilled. Foley picked up a clod of it. It was thick, dark, spongy material.

"Wassa matter, Ed?" Creel harangued good-naturedly. "You turnin' young naturalist on me? The shovels are workin', aren't they? We're eatin' earth outta her, aren't we? Watcha worryin' about?"

Creel eyed the promontory of the hill which still must be leveled before the broad bottom of the silver highway-to-be could arrow through it.

"Forget it, Ed. Just keep 'em chewing." He nodded at the steamshovels and walked off despite Foley's doubtful shake of the head.

The next day Joe Creel was busy at his figures. Supplies had to be certificated for the bookkeepers, so it wasn't until the day after that the construction boss had a chance to get back on his road again. He rose early as the inspection tour was to be meticulous. One of the company owners was coming up to the "front line" on the morrow to see what progress was being made.

Everything was fine—until Creel crossed beyond Timms' Valley and looked ahead.

"Hell!" burst explosively through his teeth.

This was a fine thing, with the Big Boss coming up within twenty-four hours. They'd been three days ahead. That was two days ago. And Hill 96? Why, damn it, it looked just the same when he'd been up here all of forty-eight hours ago.

Creel yelled for Foley and the other man finally came. A worried, distraught Ed Foley with lines in his face that the construction foreman had not noticed there before. Foley's obvious distress tempered Joe's blast. He held the reins on his temper and asked as quietly as he could:

"What's wrong here, Ed? We're not movin'."

The other man shrugged shoulders already sloped with defeat.

"Honest, Chief, we've been slugging ever since you left here day before yesterday, so help me, but there's always more *stuff* (Foley leaned on the word) to cart away."

"Hell, that's impossible!" Creel burst forth, his angry eyes flicking to the work area ahead. "That hill's the same size it was when I was here before!"

"I know it seems funny," Foley's voice was low and his eyes almost pleading, like a faithful dog's. "I tell you, Joe, it's kinda scary, and you know, some of the men, they're gettin' the idea they don't wanna work on 96! One of 'em claims he started to go down in the soft earth."

"You mean like a bog, or quicksand?"

"He claims," Foley's voice went even lower, "it was like somethin' around his ankle pullin' him down."

Creel snorted, "If I didn't know you, Ed, I'd think you'd been——"

But Foley went on, interrupting him as though he'd hardly heard the implication.

"Tell ya, Joe, it's like Hill 96 was alive!"

The other man put his hands on the foreman's arm, "Stay up here and watch, Chief. You'll see what I mean!"

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Creel nodded. "I was goin' to anyway."

Fat chance that he'd miss a trick with the Big Boss coming up. No lousy little black blob of a hill was going to mar the record his gang had compiled through much tougher land than this!

He went to work with faithful Ed Foley always at his elbow. He directed, he yelled, he pleaded, and he snarled.

The bulldozers pushed and the shovels reached and gouged, and always the trucks came and went full to the brim with thick sponge-like earth.

LATE in the day Creel gave the word and Foley passed it down the line. "The foreman wants dynamite!" and the precious powerful little sticks came up in their neat bundles. The fuses were laid, the men scattered, and the muffled, thundering roars went off in the still late-afternoon air. Black earth geysered up again and again and the shovels came back, attacking now, as machines and men worked on overtime.

It was twilight when Creel sat down on a Mack truck's running-board. One by one the machines moved away to rest for the night and the men left too, hot, dirty, sweat-streaked. Creel looked at Foley and then at the hill. Old 96 was silhouetted against the purple evening sky and it was as much of a hill as it had been before that long day of fighting and digging and dynamiting and carting away.

Creel spread his hands wide and his eyes were very dark and wide.

"I've never seen anythin' like it," he breathed. "That's the toughest devil of a hill I ever tackled!"

Foley smiled the smile of a man who has been exonerated.

"It's a devil of a hill, all right, Joe, and it's alive!" Foley left then, vanishing into the darkness, leaving behind those words in Creel's head, "It's alive!" and he stared fascinatedly at 96, and in his mind's eye the innocuous-looking mound of earth seemed to rise and writhe a bit in the gloom.

Creel shook himself out of that state of mind. He'd have another go at it tomorrow of course, but in his heart of hearts, he knew that he'd tried everything today; he also knew that Ed Foley was a competent workman, a man who knew all the tricks and who wouldn't have overlooked a single one in the construction slogger's battle against natural barriers.

Creel's mind hopped to other possibilities. This was no longer strictly his realm. With his methodical, practical reasoning, he saw it this way: If 96 would not level, if it would not humble itself to the usual tools and methods for whatever reason, then that was that, and yet the alternatives were breathtaking. The road-to-be routed around this point which had so finely been surveyed by the draftsmen who'd laid out the course would be a major task. The line would have to be broken somewhere back of Timms' Valley. Remembering that no precipitous curves are allowed in this type of modern highway engineering, it would take days to gradually bend the Trans-state over a new bed through Timms' Valley and thence around 96.

That would mean, Creel quickly figured, not a few days behind schedule but weeks, maybe more. It was a move that the boss would never make.

Creel shook his head and walked back to the pick-up parked on highway earth. He knew the construction company owner would be there tomorrow and he knew he would have to tell him the problem frankly as Foley had done, and he suspected that the Big Boss' reaction would be very much the same as his own.

This was an important job for the company. There was but a hill standing between them and success. It was as Creel had predicted to himself. The boss was pleased with the progress of work, pleased mightily when the little cavalcade of official party reached 96. The boss slapped Creel heartily on the shoulder.

"Right on time, Joe! Right on time. There's going to be a nice bonus in this for you!"

And then even before they'd gotten out of the car, Creel told the story as straight as he could. How they'd been stuck at 96 now for three or four days, and the boss' large florid face became a delicate pink and then white and then purple. He got out of the car without a word. He walked through the groups of workers with Creel at his side, but he said nothing. You don't berate a

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subordinate, you don't call him incompetent in front of his men.

The boss looked at the hill and snorted, and Joe Creel couldn't help but remember and sympathize, and the boss, who'd come up the hard way in construction, took off his fitted coat, rolled up his sleeves and started to yell orders.

THE trucks ran and the shovels dug and twice as much dynamite was used. At the end of the long day the construction owner clambered down 96, the dark soft earth staining his trousers up to his knees. Finally he shook his head, rolled his sleeves down, wiped his brow and put his coat back on, and he drove with Creel back to the nearest company headquarters.

There he perused copies of reports, reports on right-of-ways, on the topography of the land, surveyors' notations. He turned from them finally and said to the foreman, "You understand, Creel, that starting tomorrow we're one day late, stuck right up at that hill. The next day it'll be two days, and so on."

Joe nodded miserably.

Changing the path of the highway is also impossible. The time element makes it prohibitive. Aside from that, we're contracted for to do a job along a certain prescribed right-of-way. We have nothing to do with the course the excavation must take. We merely follow it."

Creel again nodded. The boss sat for a long time looking out the window. Joe cleared his throat.

"Don't you think somebody else oughtta take a shot at this? I mean, get an engineer to look the thing over. 'Course I know my men, my own assistant, is as good as they come, but still——"

"Just what I was thinking," said the boss. "No reflection on you, Creel. I saw for myself. There's something tricky here. I've had in my mind the possibility of some volcanic process, and yet you'd think they'd have let us know." His voice trailed off. "I think you're right though. No reflection on any of us or the company. We'll get in the best person we can. What do you think of Angus Mullen?"

"He's the best," Creel replied.

It was a name associated with many of the great engineering feats of our generation. Bridges, skyscrapers and viaducts, in addition to highways in many sections of the country.

"If I can get him, I will."

"And as soon as possible," breathed Creel.

"But pass the hill in the meantime," the boss ordered. "Forget it until I can get Mullen on the job. Send your men on ahead. That way we'll save time until we see what can be done about making 96 behave."

Creel nodded and left the company's office with more hope than he'd had in a couple of days. True to the owner's orders, he turned the men loose beyond Hill 96 and they were a happier lot pushing ahead beyond that black bump that stuck up in their path. The hope rose a little more when Creel got a telegram from the company boss announcing that "Mullen has accepted my offer. Will join you this week."

CREEL'S first glimpse of Angus Mullen was a disappointment. The man was tall and spare, his face even leaner than the rest of him. Close-cropped graying hair sat on a thin skull of a head. Like everything else about the face, his eyes were hollow, and when the two men shook hands, Creel was caught by the fire in those eyes, their intensity. There was something in their quality that spoke of the marvels Mullen had accomplished and would still accomplish.

Without preliminaries Creel sat down in the shack, spreading maps and plans around on the table and explained to Mullen precisely what the problem was. Here and there the engineer interjected a remark or a question, and Creel realized with an almost uncomfortable admiration that the man's mind was even more intense and alive than the eyes.

"Well," said Mullen when they'd concluded the conference, "so that is it." He almost seemed to clap his hands in anticipation. "I shall look forward, Mister Creel, to seeing your Hill 96 tomorrow, the hill your worthy assistant has called 'Alive'!"

Mullen showed detached interest the next morning on their drive up to the forward reaches of the highway excavation. Creel, with pardonable pride, pointed out

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here and there some of the difficulties that had been overcome in the grading and filling and leveling, but the eminent engineer, although nodding courteously and occasionally putting in a generous word of commendation, seemed only half-attentive.

His energy showed itself though, when before their vehicle had fully stopped rolling at the base of Hill 96, he leaped from the car, and with long-legged strides went forward. Creel strode rapidly after him until they both stood on the earthen sides of the promontory.

"Hmm," said Mullen, and again, "Hmm. You've got good equipment, I see."

"Nothin' but the best!" stoutly maintained the construction forman. "We've got the tools and the men."

"You told me you tried dynamite several times?"

Joe nodded. "No good."

One of the giant shovels was working at the crown of 96, and Angus Mullen with amazing agility, clambered to the side of the steam monster. He watched the operations intently, now and again bending abruptly to scoop up a handful of the thick rich earth, frowning down at it and squeezing it between his fingers. He watched three, four, finally five truckloads of earth—filled and carted away.

THEN he motioned the shovel operator to cease while he scrambled down into the hole that had been made. His quick thin hands poked around like a bird picking for worms. When he climbed out of the depression, Creel wondered if the engineer noticed that the hole was not as deep as it had been a few minutes earlier. Mullen was too full of thoughts and actions to be bothered by a question, Joe thought.

"How about water? Have you tried water wash?" the tall spare consultant queried.

Creel admitted no, and Mullen went down the incline waving his arms and shouting. In a few hours the equipment was on hand. Heavy hoses of flood diameter were run from the nearest available outlet up the hill, and the water spilled over the peak. Muck sluiced down 96 and was carried away by hastily built and strategically placed wooden troughs.

Before Creel's startled eyes the profile of the hill's peak began to change. It was first imperceptibly and then definitely lowering, leveling off somewhat. At the end of the work day, the construction forman was of a happier frame of mind. This guy knew his business! That damn lump of earth was giving in! Whatever it had been, peculiar formation or pressure from underground, still the water wash had begun to work.

His own crew of men were knocking off with the louder oaths and noisier remarks of the more optimistic. Things were beginning to go their way. If they kept rolling, Joe Creel could guarantee that the Trans-state would be back on schedule before many a day had passed.

The consulting engineer and Creel parted company that night with a congratulatory handshake. Joe was filled with admiration for this man. But the spare Mullen wagged his head and offered a word of caution.

"It looks a little more hopeful, Mister Creel, but days taken singly in this business can be deceptive. We must wait and see." And then he went off for the trip back to the nearest hamlet where his room was.

The foreman had got into the habit of sleeping on a rough army cot in his shack. It took too much valuable time to go back to a nearby town and get a regular room, and he didn't like to be that far away from the job.

HE was asleep, trying hard to pretend that his hard cot was an airform mattress when the shaking forced itself into his consciousness. He woke with a start and stared up into the face of Ed Foley. The light was still small from outside. It must be very early. But what streaks of gray from the morning did steal into the little shack's sleeping cubicle touched Foley's face and lit it enough for Creel to see the expression there.

"What is it, Ed?" Creel almost instinctively was out of bed reaching for his clothes, thinking of wash-outs, explosions and the thousand and one other tragedies that can occur on a job of this magnitude.

"It's one of the shovels, Chief. It's disappeared!"

Creel stopped in mid-dressing. "What!"

"I'm tellin' you," the words came faster now as Foley's face worked. "The big one

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that was working up at the crest of 96 yesterday. You know, where you and Mullen was standin'. We left her on the hill and she's not there this morning. I thought I heard a noise, Joe——"

Foley always stayed as close to the "front" as he could, pitching a tent Indian-style, wherever the forward wave of excavation needed him.

"Anyhow, I got lookin' around. You know, there's been some highjackin' of dynamite and tools, and this big steamshovel has gone!"

"Now what dirty so-and-so would try to cop a steamshovel on us!" Creel exploded finishing his dressing.

They raced for the little jeep that Foley had come back in. It wasn't until the motor was running and they were jouncing along the unfinished highway that Foley put in his final point.

"Chief, nobody stole that shovel."

"How do you mean?"

"Unless it was Paul Bunyon with the biggest damn derrick in the world! We backed her a ways evening about halfway down Hill 96. Well, there were the tread marks where she sat, kinda mixed up as though she'd wriggled a bit in her sleep. But there's nowhere the shovel could've gone! That water sluicin' washed the tracks right off the bottom of the hill and around it. Joe, there are no new marks comin' off 96 on any side! I've looked. That shovel just disappeared on the hill!"

It was as Ed Foley had described, Creel found as he circled the hill in the brighter light of full early morning. The heavy treads of a steamshovel are unmistakable, and coming from the hill at its bottom there were none. Other shovels had been at work here and there and their tread marks were easily traced either to or from the giant machines, but nowhere were there marks to indicate where the missing steam monster had gone.

"You know as well as I do, Joe, no one making off with two tons of shovel, if anyone had such a crazy idea to begin with, would come around afterward and cover up all the tread tracks even if they could."

Creel said nothing. There was this place halfway up Hill 96 where the marks of the steamshovel's belted shoes stood plain and deep. The "threshings" that Foley had spoken about might have been caused by the operator swerving his machine from side to side for some reason just before quitting time, but the tracks began and ended in that one spot. That part of it was reasonable enough. The water wash certainly would have obliterated the ascending marks of the shovel.

BUT long after the water had been turned off, the shovel had been there. It could leave easily enough by someone mounting the cab, breaking the lock and driving off. It was a long shot that anyone could do this without being observed, but there it was.

Still and all, the machine could not leave without leaving its deep heavy broad footprints for all to see and follow, and there were no such and there was no steamshovel.

The impossibleness of it all went around and around in Joe Creel's head, a head which before this job had been concerned with the prosaic problems of blastings and levelings, supplies and time schedules. The vagaries but not imponderables of breaking and removing earth and stone.

This business, though, was beyond the construction foreman as it was beyond Ed Foley, who stood behind him, white-faced and frightened.

Creel left Hill 96 with great rapid steps. His only thought was to get back to his phone, reach Mullen and get him up here as soon as possible, if that worthy were not already on his way for the day's stint.

When Creel reached his base of operations, jiggled the phone and put a call in for Angus Mullen, there was no answer and a few moments later, the engineer arrived at the construction camp.

Creel spilled out of his shack at the sound of the motor, and within a few seconds was pouring his story out. Mullen listened without a word. Then with silent concentration, he bade Creel take him out to 96 where he went over the hill inch by inch. The lines of his long thin face deepened. The eyes had an opaque far-away look.

He mumbled curtly to the foreman, "I'm going into town. I may be back late this afternoon or tomorrow."

Creel shrugged.

Mullen returned the next noon. He was

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accompanied by a small, mouselike little man with a sharp ferret face. Mullen introduced the man as Mr. Simpkins and explained later to Joe that he was "a geologist and volcanologist," a person "of great ability."

THE little man presented a rather ridiculous spectacle, Creel thought. He wore an old-fashioned driving cap several sizes too large and carried a huge briefcase, filled, the foreman found when they reached Hill 96, with Government maps, land surveys and other statistical miscellany. But Mullen followed the little fellow around as he fussed about the hill consulting his charts, examining the mound and its makeup.

Creel thought he got it after a while. The famous engineer must have decided that this formation that had given them so much trouble was a volcano. That was it, Creel reasoned. When he tried to ask questions during the day though, Mullen discouraged them and the mousy volcanologist kept his own counsel.

Back at headquarters that evening, Simpkins took the floor, speaking in a prim, exact manner.

"I can inform you, Mister Mullen," he said to the engineer, "that your hill is not a volcano. Volcanoes," he went on, pacing the floor pompously as he spoke, his oversized cap still on, "may be divided into three classes: Those that are active, and about these of course, there is obviously no question, for even the laity is scarcely unawares of an active volcano." He smiled as though secretly amused at his little joke. "The other two classes are dormant and extinct. In each instance, there is unmistakable evidence of past activity. A volcano reacts generally in only two ways. It either causes an explosive eruption in which gases and fragments of heated rock are violently expelled. Or the eruption is termed 'quiet'. In this case, there is a steady rise and outpouring of liquid lava."

"But," Mullen put in, "are there no exceptions? Are there no conditions from within the earth which would cause pseudo-volcanic action?"

"My dear Mister Mullen," Simpkins placed his tiny hands on his hips, "you must simply take my word for this. To answer your question directly, there are definite signs to the volcanologist. You, I dare say from my slight knowledge of your estimable reputation, would know the signs of a poor bit of construction work which should be condemned. I, on the other hand, am quite competent to tell of the existence and type of a volcano. Cones are built up and these are detectable. Fragments expelled by volcanic action may vary from particles to chunks.

"They may be classified as volcanic dust, ash, lapalli or bombs. I would suggest, gentlemen, if you are interested, that you read the very fine work on these subjects of Scrope or Judd, or even the layman can find much enlightenment from C. W. Tyrell's 'Volcanoes'."

Engineer Mullen, Creel could tell, was in a black mood. Furthermore, Simpkins delivered the coup d'etat.

"Whereas it is true that weakness in the earth's crust with internal pressure is the cause of volcanic phenomena, modern volcanoes almost invariably are disturbed on the earth's surface in definite belts. Gentlemen, no such belt exists within hundreds of miles of this area.

"In a word, to answer your question, Mister Mullen, Hill 96 is not a volcano—of active, dormant, or extinct variety!"

The pompous little man bowed as though in response to expected applause, and his ridiculous cap fell further over his ferret face.

FOREMAN Joe Creel saw little of Mullen the next few days. When he did appear, the engineer wore a harrassed look, his gaunt frame seemed to shrink even more and new hollows in his cheeks were evident.

One or two more abortive efforts were made to level 96, but the balance of the construction crew was already working on the other side of the hill, Foley among them. It was the latter who returned to camp one day with disquieting news. A stay-behind shift had been left at 96 to work on it as they could. This was Creel's idea. One part of his materialistic mind still unable to accept the thought that anything in the nature of earth and hill and rock could be beyond his weapons of construction and destruction. Mullen had given absent-minded approval.

Foley's breathing was fast when he con-

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fronted Foreman Creel, perhaps from exertion, perhaps from fear. Joe was not sure. But there was an unpleasant feeling that knotted bigger and bigger in his stomach as his subordinate tried to find words.

"It's Benjus!" Foley at last gasped, "Jack Benjus. He's disappeared!"

Automatically Creel started to ask the usual questions, but the other man anticipated him.

"He was coming back with a couple of the other fellas from the grading job we're doin'. They had lunch t'other side of 96. Then Benjus was to come back in here for some supplies. Last anybody saw, Jack was walkin' past that damn hill! I tell ya, it ate him! Same as the steamshovel!"

"Don't be a fool, Ed! He's wandered off. Maybe he went to town to tank up."

Even as Creel said the words, the falseness of them weighed heavily. Benjus was a veteran, ultra-reliable, family man, not a drinker, and with a splendid record.

"Didya look?" Creel bellowed aggressively, trying to cover his own extreme uneasiness. "That's wild country around 96. He might've fallen, busted his leg, or sumpin' like that."

"We've looked everywhere," Foley wagged his head, the grayness of his face pushing through the outdoor tan. "We looked and looked. Ya see, Joe, we've got his steps, his footprints. They go right up ta 96 and start to cross over a part of it. That's the shortest way to the truck line. And then—they disappeared! I tell ya, Joe, it's like the steamshovel! There's sumpin' in that there hill, sumpin' that eats things!"

Creel turned away from Foley. There was nothing he could say to the man. He remembered his incredulity at the steamshovel episode. And fear. Well, there was fear now but not the incredulity.

ROUTINELY the foreman made a report to the home office of the company about Benjus' "apparent disappearance." And routinely he got in touch with state authorities. But even as he did so, he knew that Jack Benjus would not be picked up in a town or city somewhere shooting his bankroll on women, liquor, or gambling. Some easy-come easy-go construction men did that, but not a veteran.

"No," Creel summed up to Engineer Mullen with a dogged shake of his head, "there's something funny about that hill, I guess. Foley tells me the men are gettin' kinda shy of it too."

Mullen sat for a long time in silence as was his wont. Then he turned his long troubled face towards the window, watching the setting rays of the sun touch the green foliage that stood quiet in the pre-twilight hush wherein Nature prepares herself for night.

"I have an idea, Creel," Angus Mullen spoke at last. "I want a good-sized tent, some mountain-climbing equipment, the best you can get, belts, clasps, stout rope. And I want a volunteer or two, yourself and another man. This may be dangerous. I have no right to ask you, of course."

Creel nodded his willingness quickly.

"Ed Foley'll go along too. What's up, Mister Mullen?"

"We're going to camp by that hill," the engineer said. "We've going to get as close to it as we can and we're going to watch it—by day and by night."

Even as the foreman nodded—and the room was warm—a chilliness assailed him suddenly in every limb and part of his body. He had not until now admitted it to himself, but like the men, he had become superstitious about Hill 96.

The tent was rigged just at the bottom of the first level ground. It was an eerie site even in daytime with the swathe of cleared land leading directly up to the sudden knobby rise of ground. Construction crews were working along unimpeded, far enough ahead now so that even the loud growls and snarls of their tractors and bulldozers were inaudible. The truck line was off through the woods a mile or two away through an unbroken, desolate wilderness.

Around the three men as they settled down the afternoon of the day they'd pitched the tent was nothing but the supreme quietness and majesty of Nature.

"Can't you tell us a little more what we're lookin' for?" Foley asked the engineer.

Ed had volunteered to be the third member of the party willingly, but Creel noticed that the man was visibly agitated and hoped his own uneasiness was not as plainly detectable.

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Mullen, as was his way, sat for a moment without answering and then said, "I don't know. I don't know what we're looking for, but that there is something, I am sure."

HE talked on as the light faded from the sky and the darkness seemed to come up from out of the ground around them, slowly inch by inch, creeping into the foliage, into the trees, up the hill, and finally touching the sky and blackening it.

Joe Creel had seen the sheaf of telegrams from the front office, advising, urging, querying, pleading. As 96 had held up the parkway construction, so did the company lose money; day by day as the delay continued. Creel rather guessed that Mullen's fee on this job was probably contingent on the meeting of exact time schedules. And yet the engineer did not give the impression of one who was worried about losing a fat sum of money or worried about the saving of precious minutes. There were things he could do. He could throw more of his time and effort up forward, forgetting 96 temporarily.

And yet Angus Mullen seemed wholly concerned with the hill. True, it stood like a sore thumb along their precious right-of way. But what will be, will be, Creel philosophized. It was easier to philosophize though back in his shack at field headquarters with the bustle of countless men and machines coming and going constantly.

Out here, thinking was secondary to emotions.

Mullen continued talking at great length. Some of it, the foreman wondered, might not even be so much for him and Foley as for the sake of clarifying the engineer's own thoughts to himself. Mullen spoke of our world, the earth, the fact that it was two to three billion years old so far as the most careful estimates could judge. He spoke of the fact that the earth is approximately eight thousand miles through and that little precious little, was known about the interior of our globe.

Foley's face was a whitish blob against the backdrop of the dark night around them.

"How little do we know," the engineer went on. "We creatures, Man, live on the surface of the earth. Peoples' minds for decades and centuries have turned upwards and outwards.

"We have known for years of the existence of a universe of which we are but one small part, but we are just beginning to take the first pitifully tiny steps to propel ourselves out into space for a few insignificant miles.

"But think for a moment how much less we know about the interior of this world of ours. Man has never penetrated more than a few miles down. He has theorized vaguely about the globe's content. Some concepts have claimed that the interior of the earth is molten; some that it is solid. Some insist that it consists of a series of concentric shells. Others say that beyond layers of ground and rock and structure might lie actual tubes and channels leading down into the very heart of our world. How can we be sure?"

It was a question neither Creel nor Foley could answer.

Mullen added abruptly, "Do either of you recall the writer, Jules Verne? He wrote a remarkable book once entitled, 'A Journey to the Center of the Earth.' It was, of course, considered pure fantasy at the time of its publication, but it was a fascinating work, its theme dealing with the presence of life in the interior of the earth and some explorers who found a way to excursion into that inner world of our globe." Angus Mullen fell silent then.

A SLIGHT breeze had come up and the leaves in the trees at the edge of the excavation area rustled softly. From the tilt of his head, Creel noticed after a while that Mullen was looking at Hill 96 as it rose beyond them, its black crown silhouetted against the less dark sky.

It was as though the three of them had become transfixed out there in the wilderness, Mullen's faced steadfastly towards the hill, Creel watching the engineer, and Foley sitting silently by. It was in some minutes, how many exactly Creel could not guess, that the foreman, his eyes thoroughly accustomed to the gloom, noticed Angus Mullen stiffen, his expression harden to one of extreme intentness. And the foreman, a grown man, waiting there with two other grown men, suddenly was terribly afraid, afraid to speak, afraid to ask what Mullen

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had seen, afraid to move, but most of all, afraid to turn his head and look at Hill 96 himself.

It was Foley shifting uneasily and clearing his throat harshly that broke the engineer out of this seeming state of hynotized fascination. Mullen jumped up.

"Quick!" he ordered. "Get the equipment! The belts and ropes!"

Action is the only thing to stay panic. On his feet fumbling with the heavy belts, catches and rope, Creel felt better. They made a strange procession when they were ready. Each man wore around his middle a reinforced belt of the strongest type with a rope running from it to the next one. Each carried a heavy stick and a torch.

Mullen led the way, Creel next, and Foley bringing up the rear. They scrambled up the soft earth, reaching the crown of the hill after some time, for Mullen had led them a circuitous course, stopping every now and then to paw at the loam with his hands, to cock his head on one side to the other and to poke with his stick.

At the top the three paused, and Mullen bent over.

"What was it you saw?" Foley's voice was hoarse.

For an answer the engineer bent over farther. Next he lay on his side. He lay like that for a minute and then motioned the others to lie down beside him. Creel bent over, frowned.

"What . . . ?"

The engineer waved imperatively for him to be quiet.

"Listen!" he hissed.

And then in a moment the foreman heard it, coming from the earth, from beneath it and below, from inside down in the ground. A hissing, gurgling, sucking noise, not loud but distinctly audible, rising and falling in volume, sometimes vanishing, but returning again.

"What is it?" Foley crawled closer to the other two.

But the answer was not Mullen's, and so there was only the blackness of the night and the faint wind rustling things on the surface of the earth here to speak in return. The sound from below seemed to grow then so that even when the three men stood and Engineer Mullen said hastily, "I think we'd better get off this hill," they could still hear it, whereas before they'd had to put an ear to the ground.

Mullen took the first few steps, so that before Creel felt the tug on the goodly length of rope separating him from the engineer, the latter was some lengths away. Creel started sluggishly, his mind and body still transfixed by that strange subterranean sound.

It was then that the earth directly in front of Mullen, as he was leaving the crown of 96, seemed to rise up. The whole horrendous experience could only have consumed a few, few minutes but it seemed ages to Foreman Creel. The mind does that. That brain attempts to slow down unspeakable horror in an effort to protect an outraged and shocked mentality from insanity.

It was as though the earth, or a portion of the earth, came up in front of the engineer. And then Creel thought, no, there was a giant snake, a tremendous tentacle, perhaps. Whatever it was, it came from beneath them, and it was a live, writhing thing that settled its cylindrical folds around the engineer.

THERE was, it seemed to Creel, no sound now, or perhaps it was the strange mesmeric slowing down of events and thoughts, and the scream that came from Mullen's lips sounded eternities later.

The foreman tried to spring forward, raising his stick to strike, but as he did, his foot caught and he fell heavily. Foley, though, leaped past and laid blows on the sinuous thing that was drawing Mullen into a black aperture of the earth from which it had forced its sinister length. Creel's instinct and his brain ordered him to rise and join the fray, but his fall had been heavy. He was stunned, and there was weakness, an evil in his body. And then a frightful thing happened, something that almost caused him to lose consciousness. Not five yards from his head as he lay stunned on the ground, a small area of earth heaved itself upward, and a round spherical body appeared. It was, Creel saw with growing horror, made in the image of a gigantic eye. It was turned away from him towards the two men struggling with the tentacled feeler. Its substance Creel could barely make out in the

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gloom, but it seemed of membranous stuff with sinuous tendrils disappearing down into the earth to connect it with what demon's thing it belonged from below.

The eye, for so it unmistakably looked, fixed itself upon the fighting men for but a moment. Foley's efforts with the heavy lead-weighted club were strenuous indeed, and as each blow fell, there was a smashing, sucking sound. A portion of the serpentine length quickly detached itself from Mullen and snaked around Foley, pinioning the man's arms to his sides.

Then a horrific thing began to happen. Gradually, the tentacled length began to withdraw itself into the black loam of the hill. Foley disappeared, the sound of his wild screams, suddenly checked by the rich earth that encompassed him as the thing withdrew.

Mullen, still trapped by an appendage of the monster tentacle, had the weighted stick, and as he began to go down, he spied the eye staring balefully. The engineer screamed. The sound was a mad echo of Foley's shouts. Creel by now had gotten to his feet, his knees still weak, but the heavy walking stick in his hand.

It was a matter of three, four steps, and then even as the eye swiveled on the spiny periscopic-like shaft that anchored it above the ground, even as the eye began to turn towards him, Joe Creel struck with all the strength of his hard, compact body and the weight of the lead stick.

The sound was an obscene plopping noise, and there was another noise from below, from the ground beneath that, a sighing, gurgling that rose to a high pitch. But it was not a scream, for a scream is human and this was not.

The directing eye was no more than a mass of gray membranous rubbish now, but a part of the long feeler still tugged furiously at Mullen, and the engineer was slowly being drawn down.

Creel, himself, felt an undeniable tug. It came from the rope at his midriff. The rope disappeared into the black ground at his feet, at the one end of which he knew was Ed Foley. The foreman fought with his strength and in the soft earth he stumbled and clawed, fell, scrambled to get back on his feet only to go down again, and each time the swathe of soft earth on which he fought grew deeper.

MULLEN was screaming at him from a short distance away, and finally the words made themselves clear. Gasping and sobbing, Creel clawed the claspknife out of his pocket and severed the line. As he did so, the end of the rope whipped into the earth like a frightened snake.

Creel rushed for Mullen then. He raised his stick again and again and clubbed down folds of snake-like matter pressing the engineer into the ground. He plunged his knife again and again into the thickness of the feeler. He hacked at it, redoubling his efforts as an oily sticky substance flowed from the wounds.

Finally Mullen fell free, and the two men staggered and lurched off the hill, running as fast as they could before they collapsed from exhaustion on the healthy brown earth of the excavated land beyond.

It was an hour or more before the two were able to crawl to their tent. There were welts on Mullen's skin but the engineer waved away Creel's first-aid kit. Under the kerosene lamp, Mullen once again examined charts of the hill, and he began to figure. He filled page after page with calculations, writing in a small, cramped, furious hand. Creel watched, lying on the army cot, too tired to question, too tired to wonder. He fell asleep, even despite his fear of still being so close to that awful, accursed hill.

He woke fitfully in the small hours of the morning. Mullen was talking to him, a wild-eyed, gesticulating Mullen. The foreman listened.

The engineer spoke of construction plans, of what he was going to do, and immediately, to take care of Hill 96. And strangely, Creel found himself obeying without question, because there was a pressure and foreboding within him almost too terrible to bear.

The crew grumbled, and there were many raised eyebrows, questions, and sharp looks, but after all Joe Creel and Engineer Angus Mullen were the bosses, at least here in the construction area.

All day the tractors worked and the dynamiters and the trucks. Cement was brought up and steel girders and more

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cement, and in a few days, more of the workers were uneasy and grumbling, and there was loud talk about the camp that "These guys must be nuts! What're they building—a monument or sumpin'?"

THEN somebody came from the front office, and that was the end. The somebody was the company president, Melkin.

"You're mad!" Melkin screamed. "You're insane, and you, too, Creel. Not one penny you'll get for this, Mullen! I'll break you both! I'll sue you!"

Mullen tried to explain as slowly as he could, but there wasn't too much coherence in the man now. He spoke more and more often of "monsters from below" and a strange, unusual weakness in the crust of the earth which here in this spot would allow the breakthrough which these creatures had been waiting for, for countless centuries.

They came to call it Mullen's Monument, and less than two months from the time it was completed, and that was the morning of the very day that Melkin had arrived on the scene, Angus Mullen was taken away to the Everhill Sanitarium for the insane, a hopeless deranged man.

With great trepidation Melkin had to suggest to the Highway Commission road contractors and surveyors and parkway officials that the course of the concrete lanes would have to be altered, altered rather abruptly to take a course which would curve *around* Hill 96. Of course the curve would be graded and as gradual as possible, but this was one of those things.

Joe Creel was busted completely. He would never again find work with any construction company in the country. That was the least they could do for his following along and countenancing the insane actions of a madman. They told a story up at the construction office about Creel as the years passed, how as a shiftless loafer, he still went on paying a pilgrimage to Mullen's Monument. Maybe he had caught some of that nuttiness, too. Kept telling people he had to inspect it, that ugly thing out in the wilderness. But he'd go there every so often. People had seen him. And he would examine the concrete inch by inch, go over the whole eyesore as though it was the White House or a king's palace—or even more important.

The two men drove along the smooth ribbon of concrete. The new car purred happily. Finally they came to a sign marked "Timms' Valley." Just beyond the sign, the road began to curve.

The motorist turned his head. "Right here? Right here's the place you've been telling me about?"

The hitchhiker nodded. "You can let me out anywheres in here, mister, and thanks to you."

The car glided to a stop. The other man thumbed the door open. He was halfway out when the motorist, seeing it, hollered out, "Hey! Is that thing *it*? Mullen's Monument? It looks like a huge cap!"

Through the trees and across the land to the right, a great white square loomed up. The hitchhiker looked and smiled slightly.

"That's it, mister."

The motorist whistled. "Imagine that! Looks like the foundation of a huge skyscraper, only even solider."

Even from this distance he could see the heaviness of the construction, the girder ends sticking out and the reinforced concrete work.

"He must have been crazy!" the motorist breathed.

"Mister Mullen?" the hitchhiker shut the door. "I wouldn't be too sure, mister. If you'd been there that night—" He started to turn away, heading into the underbrush at the side of the road towards the unsightly cap of concrete in the distance.

"Wait!" the motorist stuck his head out the window. "Are you—you must be——!"

But his passenger was into the shrubbery now, plunging purposefully towards that gigantic thing in the distance, the greatest engineering feat Mullen, or any other had devised.

It had been half a year since he'd been out here, he mentally noted. He'd have to go over it very carefully. He thought of what the motorist had said, that it looked like a lid. How near the man had come to the truth! It was a lid, protecting us from things from down below, a lid that must forever be kept tightly shut. And Joe Creel plunged on towards the Monument.

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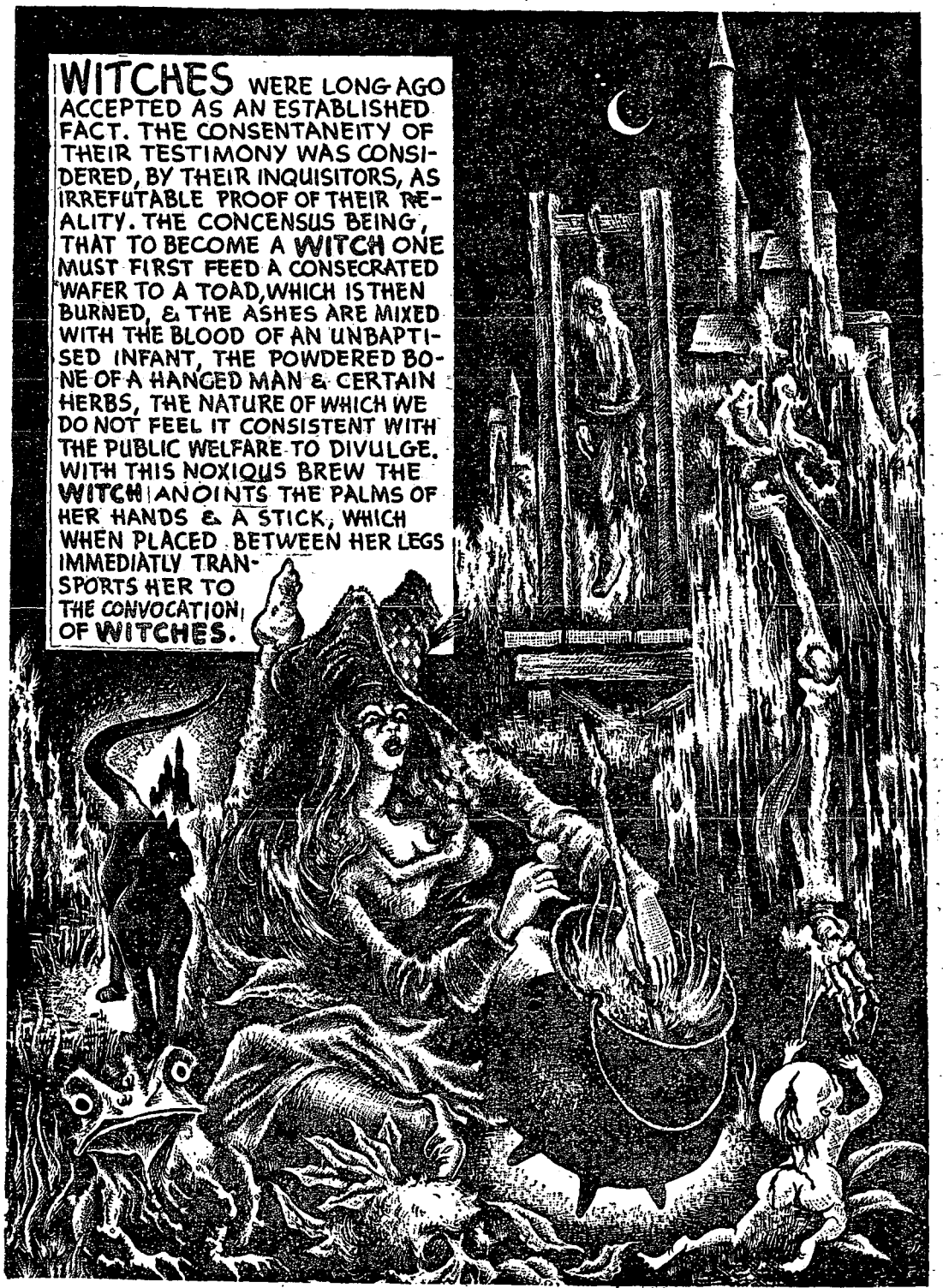

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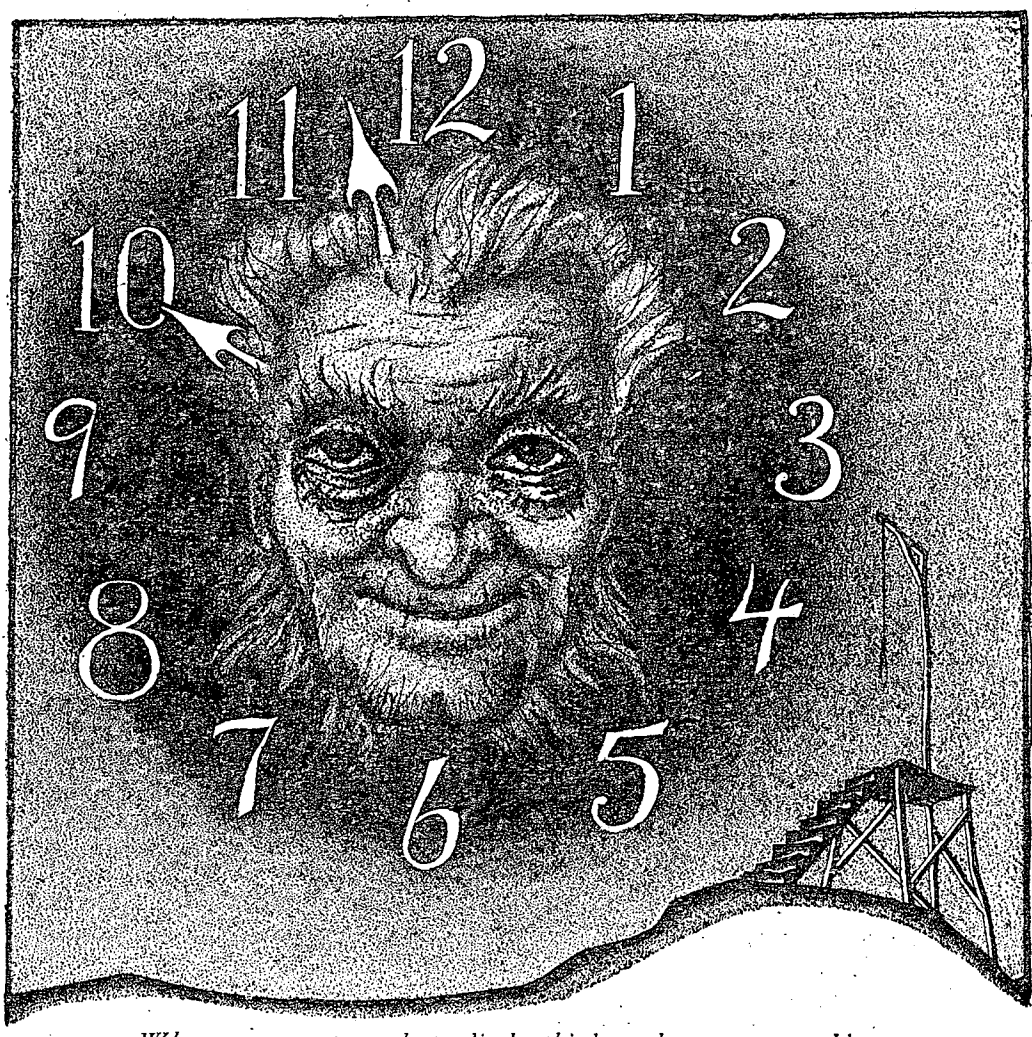
Grandfather McGraw

THE sun rose bright and cheerful on the morning of May 10, 1858, over the Village of Norcutt, County Seat of Bouster, and Richard McGraw II, looking from his window, couldn't help resenting that this day of all days should be so beautiful.

The Jail and Courthouse faced each other across the Green. The hands of the big clock over the Courthouse door showed six

BY ROGER S. VREELAND



When a man gets ready to die he thinks and sees strange things

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

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minutes of seven. Richard looked at the clock from his window. He loved that clock. He felt a personal pride in it, for it had been made, installed, and presented to Norcutt by his Grandfather McGraw. Richard's memories of his Grandfather were profoundly endearing. No greater ideal could he imagine than to be as fine a man as Grandfather McGraw had been.

When the sun struck the gilt hands and numerals of the clock, they glistened; and its face, it seemed to Richard, smiled with that calm, benign, and understanding light that had been Grandfather McGraw's.

Richard could see the clock well across the Green, for his room was in the Jail. Often he had imagined he saw his Grandfather's face in the clock, but this morning there had been an instant when it was startlingly real—that characteristic aspect of kindly assurance. The brightness of the morning, however, clashed with the gloom clouding his soul. This was the day he was to be hanged. The gallows was up. The hour set. The gaunt structure wasn't quite within the view of his narrow window, but its long shadow lay across the Green between him and the Courthouse, and he could even see the ringlike shadow of the noose.

Yes, for Richard there was ironic mockery in the pure bright morning, in the pungency of the spring air. Illogical, unreasonable Fate was slamming the door in his face just as he was reaching the threshold of full life. And now, unsparing of his sensitivities, all the fair elements of nature were conspiring, combining to add bitterness to his last hours.

What had been the matter with the people? The court? The judge? The witnesses? All of them? Hadn't the good clean life he had lived counted for anything? Didn't it mean something that he was the grandson of Richard McGraw, the great clockmaker whose life had spread fame for the town? No, no one thought of that now. All they said was that he had murdered Old Man Kipp, murdered him for his money. They seemed sure of it. There had been so much pompous rigmarole. So much talk of justice. Circumstantial evidence. And so many false conclusions. He had protested his innocence vehemently at first. Then, abashed at their unwillingness to believe him, and thoroughly disillusioned, he had sunk into lethargic apathy.

They had found Kipp's money hidden in his foster father's barn. Anybody could have hidden it there. He had been out the night of the murder, in the vicinity of Kipp's house. He had been seen. He often took walks at night when the stars were clear. He liked the stars. They were friendly and they filled him with wonder. He had bought a little book about the constellations. But when he had tried to explain this, they looked at him with—almost with disgust—as though he should have thought of something better to tell.

Richard turned again to his little window and looked into the sunshine. People already were gathering on the Green. Yes, it was to be a big party—to watch him hang! Carriages were arriving and people getting out as though it were a Sunday School picnic. He could see Jake Hoag in the center trying to impress a group of girls. Richard disliked Jake. The girls were laughing, but Jake was too dumb to know they were probably laughing at rather than with him.

Well, at least he was contributing entertainment to the countryside. Probably if he'd had blood kin to champion him things would have worked out differently. But what could he expect from foster parents who raised him merely through a sense of duty? His Grandfather McGraw was the only real kin he had ever known. Ah, but he sort of made up for all the others he didn't have! How his Grandfather McGraw would have championed him if he had been alive! He would have shouted, waved his cane, and known the right things to say to make people think clearly.

For a while Richard spurned sight of the bright outdoors and sat on his cot. Then he looked out once more. The morning was passing rapidly, strangely. He had expected it to drag. How the crowd was gathering! He was to hang at ten o'clock. He wondered why they had chosen that time. In stories he'd read people were always hanged at either sunrise or sunset. Well, at least he wasn't panicky anymore. He was determined to impress the crowd with his calmness.

But try as he would, he couldn't entirely suppress thoughts upon who really had mur-

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dered Old Man Kipp. Somehow he couldn't help suspecting either Jake Hoag or Tom Putner, though he had no good reasons. Tom, he considered, had very little conscience. And Jake was something of a nitwit, though he had a mean streak in him.

THE clanking of keys and the sound of heavy footsteps came from the corridor. They were coming for him! His throat grew tight and a tingling went through his arms, legs, and back; and his stomach tightened.

People were not moving about and talking as they had been. They were still and were looking toward him. Richard backed away. Could they see him? But he cast a final glance toward the clock. It was twelve after nine. His eyes lingered a moment on the face. There seemed to be a different expression on it. The hands were like arched eyebrows—menacing, angry. The figures grew blurred—from tears. *I guess Grandfather doesn't want me to cry!* he thought. *After all, I am nearly a man,* and he wiped his eyes. The dial was still blurred, but Grandfather's face shone from it. It was his imagination, of course, but it was comforting. Especially because Grandfather's face was sympathetic. It was the look Grandfather used to have when he told him not to be afraid of something.

Richard turned with a jerk. His door was being opened. He was surprised. What was Reverend Potter . . . ? Oh, yes, of course. They always sent a preacher to a man about to be hanged. Mr. Potter took his hand and told him to sit down. Mr. Potter sat beside him and began to talk. But his words didn't register. Just words. Soon he realized that Mr. Potter was more nervous than he was. That relieved him a little. Richard began to say something about his Grandfather, but he didn't like the sound of his own voice so he stopped. Mr. Potter was praying now. Richard shook himself. He couldn't get into the right mood. All he could think of was whether Mr. Potter thought God was really listening to him. Finally the minister went away and the jailer came in, put a black cloth over his face.

"I don't need that!" blurted Richard.

But the jailer insisted. *I don't mind looking at them,* he thought, *but I guess they don't want to look at me!*

Now came the moment he feared—walking to the gallows! He remembered, though, how he was going to impress everyone. The jailer took his arm to lead him. He began to walk, but strength was leaving his legs. The thought, however, of having to be dragged was too repulsive. *I will walk as a brave man!* he said to himself. *They shall see that I am innocent! And when they find out later that I am innocent, they will say that Richard McGraw, the grandson of Richard McGraw the clockmaker, walked to the gallows as his Grandfather would have, for he was the same kind of man!*

He walked. Someone else took his other arm and they led him through the door, down the steps. There were hundreds of people watching him, he felt them, but their silence was not pleasant. Gravel crunched under his feet now. It was the path to . . . He swallowed hard and raised his chin. He wanted to shout—tell the people that they didn't need to be so quiet and solemn. Then he stumbled—on wood. It was the first step up. The guiding arms clutched him. He caught his balance—made the rest of the way all right. It would soon be over.

They turned him around. A faint murmuring from the Green encroached upon the silence. Then a deep dramatic voice from below him reviewed the crime, *their* version, and the trial. Richard didn't listen carefully. To him it was all travesty. Finally, in a rasping whisper, came the concluding words: *To be hanged by the neck until he is dead.* A pause, and a voice closer to him, a voice tinged with sympathy, asked: Richard McGraw, do you have a final request?"

Richard's first impulse was to reply impatiently: *Yes, for God's sake get it over with!* Then he thought of something else. Clearing his throat, he tested his voice on "Yes." It was a little shrill, but at least steady. "I would like the cloth removed for a minute so that I may look at my Grandfather's clock."

A muffled babble arose from the mob. Some had not heard and others passed the quotation along. And he heard the voices of the officials close below him. "Yes, grant it," said one. He wasn't sure whether

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it was the sheriff or the judge. Fingers touched the back of his neck and the cloth fell away. He swayed. He was much higher than he thought. He stared down into the hundreds of gaping faces. He smiled at them, faintly. But the people seemed too shocked to return it. Then he raised his eyes over their heads across the Green to the Courthouse—to the clock. The big hand was almost straight—three minutes of ten! But Richard was disappointed. He didn't know exactly why—except that the clock seemed to have lost all expression. It looked like just any clock. He had thought that perhaps his Grandfather's face . . .

The cloth was put back over his eyes. Someone said: "Not until exactly ten o'clock." Someone else was moving things. To Richard those three minutes dragged interminably. The crowd grew so still it seemed to have stopped breathing. Time had become a void. Surely, he thought, it was ten o'clock by now! He waited . . . waited. Everyone's eyes, he imagined, must be on his Grandfather's clock. That didn't seem right, that it should fall upon his Grandfather's clock to give the final signal for his doom. He tried to picture the minute hand. It didn't move gradually, as in small clocks, but jumped a full minute at every sixty-second interval. Probably it had one more jump to make.

Richard was beginning now to tremble. This last minute seemed everlasting. He has succeeded in keeping his mind blank about the final details, but now he was contemplating them. He couldn't help it. His muscles tightened and relaxed involuntarily, he grew cold. It seemed like such a long, long . . .

A voice from someone on the Green suddenly pierced the silence.

"The clock has stopped!"

The babble rose in a fast crescendo. The people, he imagined, were turning; those with watches checking them with the clock. Rough hands suddenly grabbed him. Something hard fell on his shoulders, tightened about his neck. But the rope had caught the bottom of his mask, tugged it downward uncovering his eyes. He found himself looking straight at the clock. It still said three minutes of ten, but . . . Ah! There he was! Just as clear and bright as the face of an October moon—his Grandfather McGraw! And he was grinning!

Then—suddenly in the center of the Green—a commotion arose. Someone was making a howling fuss. Richard couldn't make out at first who it was, but the excitement around this person spread rapidly. Everyone, including the officials, tried to converge toward the center of the disturbance. Then a woman's high-pitched voice called out: "He says *he* done it! He says *he's* the one who killed Old Man Kipp!"

"Who?" came a mixture of shouts.

"Jake Hoag!"

Richard felt his legs growing weak. He was alone. They seemed to have forgotten him. He lifted the noose off his head. He was on the verge of collapse! He knew it! But somehow, as he felt himself sinking, his eyes went toward Grandfather McGraw's clock again. Grandfather McGraw's face was gone, but—*the minute hand was exactly at twelve!*

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The Lorenzo Watch

BY CARL JACOBI

IT WAS a curious fact that Martin Hatworth, though affected with a bad case of myopia, necessitating thick-lensed spectacles, was nevertheless singularly adept at finding things other persons had lost. Throughout the village of Farn's Landing he was forever being called upon by residents, young and old, to retrieve articles that had strayed from their owners.

The Farn's Landing *Sentinel* had in its file of back issues several accounts of Hatworth's peculiar prowess in this field. There was the time in 1933 when the Marshal had dropped somewhere a costly diamond brooch, placed in his keeping by a tourist's wife who had decided to accompany her husband fishing. Hatworth, without asking questions, had gone straight to the stile of a nearby pasture, groped a moment in the weeds under the bottom board, and discovered it. Asked why he had gone there, where even the Marshall had forgotten he

He might best be called a retriever. A retriever of dead bodies

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

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had been, Hatworth had only smiled quietly and replied:

"I got a knack for this sort of thing, that's all."

But knack or otherwise, it was an unprofitable avocation, frequently in fact expensive, taking time away from his work at the grist mill on the edge of town. Moreover, his wife, a nagging woman at best, was continually upbraiding him for what she called his unappreciated efforts.

Nineteen thirty-nine had been a good year of discovery for Hatworth. He had found no less than twenty-seven dollars in cash, five dollars of which he was able to keep for himself as unclaimed, two sets of ignition keys for non-residents' cars, a .30-30 rifle, Old Man Barne's "folding camera," and a pair of copper-tipped oars. But it was in 1942 that he discovered how to realize a profit on his strange ability.

In that year Farn's Landing had a total of four accidental drownings, and in spite of extra guards put on at the bathing beach and warnings given to all fishermen, the succeeding years saw a mounting toll of water deaths. Of course, Farn's Landing was primarily a resort town, and such tragedies were to be expected. But in each case there was considerable difficulty in locating the body. More and more it was realized that Cannon Lake, with its upper and lower bays, its many islands and channels, was as dangerous a labyrinth as it was beautiful.

Hatworth's plan was simple. He would recover those bodies and do so in a way that would play upon the superstitious beliefs of the year-around townsfolk. Himself a confirmed skeptic, a large raw-boned man in his middle fifties, he formulated the advance details carefully. First he saw to it that his finding abilities were advertised to every settlement on the lake. Next he caused it to be bruited about that those abilities were the result of occult methods upon which he had put a considerable amount of study. To his work at the grist mill he frequently carried a book on spectral manifestations, and he kept a shelf of equally impressive volumes in a prominent place in his home, all to the outspoken disgust of his wife.

When the spring of the year came around and with it the first drowning of the season, Hatworth waited impatiently during the long days of dragging the lake, and when all attempts to find the body had failed, quietly offered his services. Not for nothing had he lived his entire life in Farn's Landing. He was aware of one fact that so far had escaped the other townsfolk: that there was a central underwater current running obliquely through both arms of the lake and that sooner or later any heavy object would be drawn into that current and so would be carried along to Blackwell Marsh on the south shore. Blackwell Marsh was seldom visited, even by those in search of drowning victims. There was something oppressive about its tangled rip grass, its dark cattails nodding sullenly in the wind, and its constant chorus of frogs.

THE first time Hatsworth was called upon, he had acted a little too impulsively. He had rowed once around Crane Island, waited until dusk, and then headed directly for Blackwell Marsh. In the course of an hour, aided by a powerful flashlight, he had discovered the body, that of a boy of twelve who had wandered from his companions while swimming in deep water. Hatworth had removed all tell-tale reeds and rip grass and returned to Farn's Landing, there to claim the hundred dollar reward which had been posted.

There were commendations on his work and a few under-the-breath remarks that he had joined with the devil in accomplishing it. But these, he realized, were not enough.

On the next occasion when a young woman was the victim, he paid more attention to stage setting. He dressed all in black and demanded that the immediate shores of the lake be vacated for an hour after he had begun his activities. Earlier in the afternoon he had cast upon the water six loaves of bread, after first digging a hollow in each loaf and depositing a drop of quicksilver therein. These loaves, he carefully explained, would converge on the spot where the body lay. Then with a red lantern on the thwart of the rowboat and the oarlocks heavily muffled with strips of black cloth, he pushed out on the dark water.

Drownings at Cannon Lake continued to mount at an alarming rate, and Hatworth, gradually increasing the fee for his services,

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profited nicely. He found himself scanning the western sky each morning in anticipation for a possible storm, and then counting the fishing boats that were visible out on the bay.

The money he received from this employment gave him a glow of satisfaction as he watched it slowly grow. Nevertheless, personal finances began to play a more and more disagreeable part in his life. His wife constantly bemoaned the fact that their house was in need of repair, that her clothes were shabby and that her table held only the plainest of food.

"Found the Altmore woman's body today," Hatworth said unemotionally, seating himself for the evening meal. "Took me four hours."

Martha Hatworth brushed a strand of iron gray hair from her eyes and voiced a single question:

"How much?"

"Two hundred dollars," Hatworth replied uneasily.

"Humph. Well, it'll pay the taxes and my dentist's bill, if not much more."

This incessant talk of money would not have irritated Hatworth so much if he had not known that his wife had a tidy sum of her own.

When her father, a jewel merchant, had died recently, she had inherited considerable money, together with some bonds and a fine Lorenzo watch. The watch was a rare one. It had twelve large-sized diamonds in the back of the hunting case and a beautiful emerald mounted in the center, and Hatworth had coveted it from the first moment he had seen it.

But Martha had ideas of her own. "These things are mine," she said, "and you keep your hands off. It's your duty as a husband to support me."

True to her word, she had even kept from Hatworth the amount of her inheritance. Only the watch did she display openly with a flaunting deliberateness aimed apparently at goading her husband into jealousy.

EACH night before retiring, she carefully removed it from the chain about her neck, wound it slowly and wiped it with a polishing cloth. After that she opened the back of the case and did something to the movement with a tiny screwdriver, apparently following the training passed on to her by her father. Then she pushed in the stem and let its little fairy bells announce in consecutive chimes the hour and the minutes after the hour. She replaced the watch on the chain around her neck, a mute warning to Hatworth that she did not trust him.

Once and only once had Hatworth been able to get close enough to see the watch in detail. Ornately carved, it was equipped with five dials: the usual hour, minute, and second hands, and little square readings for the day of the week, the month, and the year. The face was an intricate mosaic of engraving; in the top right corner a tiny skull was in evidence; at the bottom was some inscription in what seemed to be Latin but so minute as to be illegible. The hands themselves were flesh-colored and were fashioned to resemble human feminine hands.

But it was the jewels that attracted Hatworth, and one way or another, he intended to have them.

The summer passed, however, and he had other things to occupy his mind. By the first of September, Farn's Landing had recorded no less than seven drownings, in each of which tragedies Hatworth had recovered the body. On September 2nd the town was in an uproar again. Sixteen-year-old Cynthia Dobson had taken out her canoe alone and had not returned. A search party was organized and took off in a power launch as soon as the news became known. They found the canoe floating bottomside up near Crane Island but no sign of the girl.

Hatworth was sitting on the wharf, placidly smoking his pipe when the search party returned.

"Looks like another job for you," Jeb Howatt said, shaking his head. "This damned lake is a devil lake, if you ask me."

Three hours after his initial theatricals had been completed, Hatworth returned with a silent object covered with sail cloth in his rowboat. He also returned with something else—a plan.

All the way home that night he mulled over it, and by morning the details were complete in his mind. He did his work at the grist mill badly during the ensuing day, counting the hours until it was time for him to go home. When at last he was ready to

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leave, he slipped a crowbar under his arm and headed down the East road.

A quarter of a mile from town, he turned into an almost overgrown side-road which led to his house through a grove of second-growth Poplar. Presently he came upon the wooden bridge that crossed the deep-flowing Talberry Creek.

There he fell to work. He pried loose three center planks of the bridge, breaking off bits of their rotting ends and arranging them so that they would swing downward when weight were put on either side of the middle beam. Then he carefully kicked dirt over the boards, hiding all traces of his work.

Back home, he said to his wife, "Have you seen old Mrs. Bentley lately? Jeb Howatt told me today she was asking about you. She's pretty bad."

The bait was taken. An hour later Martha filled a vacuum bottle with some chicken broth and put on her hat and coat.

"Might as well take the short out over Talberry Creek," Hatworth said as she headed for the door. "That is," he added, "unless you're afraid of the dark."

Martha's derisive humph told him that this suggestion too had reached its mark. Hatworth waited until he heard his wife's steps die off down the walk. Then he left the house quickly and headed across the adjoining fields for the house of his nearest neighbor, the Plummets.

As he paced down the path in the darkness, he visualized what would happen. Martha, crossing the Talberry Creek bridge, would step upon the loose planking and be catpulted into the center of the stream. Unable to swim, she would be carried out into the lower arm of Cannon Lake, where eventually her body would be drawn into the underwater current, to be finally deposited at Blackwell Marsh.

It was now six-thirty p.m. Martha should reach the bridge in a quarter of an hour or six forty-five. Immediately upon her falling, water would enter the old-fashioned case of the Lorenzo watch she always wore about her neck and stop it.

There was no reason for any suspicion, but in the event any were directed toward him, he would have a perfect alibi. For the stopped watch would indicate definitely not only the hour and minute of the accident but also the day of the week. And at that particular time he would be innocently chatting with the Plummets.

EVERYTHING happened as Hatworth had expected. He was part of the crowd of morbid onlookers that watched the investigation at the bridge, and he held his breath as Marshal Edmonds examined the splintered ends of the planks. But Edmonds only sighed and said:

"She fell through here all right and must've been carried out into the lake. I'm sorry, Martin, but I guess that's the way it was."

That was Tuesday, and it was not until Wednesday night that Hatworth began to notice the ticking. The sound came into his consciousness gradually, and he did not become fully aware of it until he was ready to go to bed: a low indistinct pulsation that he fancied at first was the beating of his own heart. He sat very still on the edge of the bed and listened. But he heard nothing then, and after a moment got up and extinguished the light.

He fell asleep almost at once, but awoke an hour later, vaguely aware that he was straining his ears again. Was it his imagination or had he heard the tinkling chimes of a repeater watch, almost at the limit of his hearing range? The sound was not repeated, however, and he dozed off.

On the morrow he set about to search for his wife's inheritance which must be somewhere in the house since he knew Martha would have no time for banks. At the end of two hours, however, he stood again in the bedroom nonplussed. Though he had searched the house from top to bottom, he had found no trace of either money or bonds. For the first time his knack of finding lost articles had resulted in failure. He cursed savagely. And then suddenly a thought occurred to him.

Several nights ago when Martha had taken the Lorenzo watch from the chain about her neck to wind it, she had opened the back of the cover and scratched some words on the soft gold with her nail file. He knew that Martha had a bad memory. She was forever writing memos on odd scraps of paper. He couldn't be sure, of course, but

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it was reasonable to suppose that she had marked the location of her hiding place on the watch case.

He returned to the living room, took up a magazine and began to read. But presently he became aware of the ticking again. He sat there, listening. The sound had a hollow quality as if the watch—for unmistakably it was a watch—lay in a box or some covered receptacle.

Hatworth's fingers trembled slightly as he poured himself a glass of peach brandy before going to bed.

That night he dreamed. He was climbing up the sheer wall of a granite cliff, fighting to find toe-holes in the black rock. Above him, a huge watch depended from a golden chain. But the rope to which he clung with his left hand was fastened with a careless loop over the hour hand of that watch. He could see the hand plainly; it rested horizontally on the quarter after the hour mark, and even as he watched, it began to move downward very slowly. As the hand moved, the looped rope slipped relentlessly toward its end.

He looked down in desperation. Below was a heaving sea, capped with fingers of flying spume. The yellow waves rolled and receded, and then he saw that they were not waves at all, but a layer on layer of microscopic watches, closely packed. Their faces seemed to be looking up at him like a thousand sightless eyes. And the huge watch above began to chime the half hour as the anchoring rope began to slip free.

Hatworth awoke, bathed in prespiration, trembling violently. Frantastic as it was, the dream had seemed real, so real that he could almost hear those chimes now, vibrating through the silence of the room. He did hear it! Lying there stiff and motionless, he strained his ears for a repetition of the sound. When it came—ten faint peals followed by a pause and two more chimes, Hatworth leaped from the bed, ran across the room and switched on the light. He saw nothing foreign or unusual.

Morning came, and he was definitely in bad sorts. He blamed the night's experiences on the peach brandy, and he cursed what in broad daylight seemed to be an overactive imagination. Noting that his supply of

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Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared William J. Delaney, who having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the President-Treasurer of WEIRD TALES and that the following is to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (Section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations), to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.; Editor, D. McIlwraith, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, William J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.; William J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the book of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner: and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

(Signed) WILLIAM J. DELANEY, President.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 16th day of September, 1947. [SEAL]

(Signed) HENRY J. PAUROWSKI.

Notary Public, Bronx Co., No. 16, Reg. No. 51-P-9. Certificate filed in N. Y. Co., No. 77, Reg. No. 180-P-9.

My commission expires March 30, 1949.

food staples was running low, he headed for town, deliberately taking the short cut road which led to the bridge over Talberry Creek.

The road was deserted as it had been since the new highway had been cut through a quarter mile farther west. Hatworth strode out onto the bridge and stopped to gaze over the rail down at the dirty brown water. Suddenly he stiffened. Someone was coming. Well, he must remain the sorrowed husband, immersed in his thoughts. He didn't move.

The steps thudded hollowly as they entered the approach to the bridge. And there was something strangely familiar about those steps. Abruptly there came a crash, a rending of wood and a short cry. Hatworth wheeled.

But as he looked back on the sunlit bridge, he stared with incredulity. There was no one in sight. The bridge planking was firm and solid where it had been nailed down by the Marshal the morning before. And below the brown water of Talberry Creek swept on placidly without a ripple to disturb its surface.

WHEN Hatworth returned with his provisions, he glanced at his watch as was his custom to see how long the trip had taken him. The watch had stopped at 6:45, though he was quite sure he had wound it the previous evening. He went into the living room and looked at the old-fashioned grandfather clock in the corner. Its pendulum hung motionless, and the hands were stopped at 6:45. A mounting sense of uneasiness began to sweep over Hatworth. He stood there a moment, gnawing his upper lip. Then he strode into the bedroom. The taboret clock he had given Martha for a Christmas gift three years before would tell him the correct time. It never stopped.

But the sweep second hand of the electric taboret clock was motionless, and with a kind of grim horror Hatworth saw that the figures in the tape dial were 6:45.

Control left him then. With unsteady steps he moved into the hallway to the wall telephone and called Seth Denning, the town jeweler.

"Can you come over here right away?" he said when the connection was made. "I've got something I want to show you."

The time until Denning arrived Hatworth

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spent sitting in a chair, staring blankly into space. At length, however, the jeweler arrived, a little precise individual with pince-nez glasses. He came in somewhat testily, irritated at having been called away from his shop. Silently, Hatworth ushered him from one timepiece to another, then said huskily: "They all stopped at 6:45. I want to know what's wrong."

Denning stared. "You're a fool, Martin," he said. "I suppose, though, I'll have to look them over just to satisfy you."

He busied himself for the better part of half an hour, taking off the back covers to reveal the movements, tapping a few things here and there, making adjustments.

"They're okay now," he said finally. "I'd have that grandfather clock cleaned one of these days, though, if I were you. It needs it pretty badly."

Hatworth nodded, then asked a question that was uppermost in his mind.

"Denning," he said, "how long can a watch run with one winding?"

The jeweler thought a moment. "Oh, fifteen or twenty hours in some cases. Depends on the watch."

"And do you think," Hatworth persisted, "It would be possible for a watch to stop and start up again of its own accord? A watch that had been mislaid, for example?"

Denning shrugged. "It's possible, I suppose. Vibration might stop it; a jar could start it up again. Good-bye, Martin. Don't forget about cleaning that grandfather."

LATE that afternoon Hatworth, still deep in thought, strolled down to the lake front. There he met Jeb Howatt just as the latter was climbing into a dory, preparatory to rowing out on the lake.

"I'm going to look once more," Howatt said. "If I don't find her, I'm afraid it'll be up to you."

But Hatworth could stand it no longer. "Get out of that boat," he said huskily. "I've got to find her! Do you understand, I've got to . . ."

Howatt slowly climbed onto the wharf, and Hatworth took his place at the oars.

Three hours later he was back in his house, pacing back and forth restlessly. Though he had searched the length of

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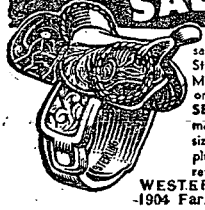

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Blackwell Marsh, he had found nothing. His entire plan hinged on the recovery of his wife's body. Without it, while there would of course be *corpus delicti* and consequently no evidence against him, there would likewise be no alibi and hence ample grounds for talk and rumor that even now he was aware was gathering. And there would be no Lorenzo watch. Hatworth was even more convinced now that the watch held the secret of his wife's inheritance.

It happened at that moment he was turning down the covers of the bed. Out of the corner of his eye he thought he saw a movement of something on the top of the dressing table. He turned very slowly.

Outlined darkly against the mahogany veneer of the table was the wet imprint of a female hand. Hatworth watched the little film of moisture slowly dim and grow smaller, to be replaced by a second impression farther along the table surface. It was as if an invisible blind person were there, groping for something it couldn't find. Then Hatworth saw a third point taking form near the center. At that point stood Martha's satin jewel box, and the top of its padded cover was depressed as if some round object rested there. Abruptly the depression was gone with the padded satin rising slowly back into position. Hatworth felt a cold draught of air pass through the room and out the door.

But nothing happened after that; he heard no further ticking, and he slept the night through with the completeness of one whose nerves are bordering on exhaustion.

Next day Hatworth began a second and more systematic search of the house for his wife's inheritance. He left no article of furniture, no conceivable hiding place untouched. He probed the seat cushions of the chairs with a long needle. He took out the dowel pins and separated the sections of the tables. He looked for false bottoms in bureau drawers. He emptied vases, looked in back of pictures, even examined the chest where Martha had kept her silverware. He found nothing.

At nine o'clock that evening he headed for the lake front, carrying three loaves of bread, in each of which he had scooped out a hollow and placed a drop of quicksilver.

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A week ago Hatworth would have looked upon such stage props with an inward smile. Now he wasn't so sure. Old Wives' Tales did say such loaves would float over a drowned body, and considering all that had happened he was not inclined to ridicule them.

He reached his dory without meeting anyone, untied the painter and pushed out onto the black lake. The oar locks were recently oiled, and there was no sound save the dip of his oars and the waves slapping against the prow. Hatworth rowed swiftly, watching the lights of Farn's Landing recede as the distance increased. Once a loon startled him as it dipped low in the sky and gave forth its queer laugh. He passed Crane Island, a darker shadow in the gloom, and headed directly for Blackwell Marsh.

When the reeds and cattails began to brush against the sides of the boat, he switched on his electric torch and played it over the water. Back and forth he moved, gradually working his way deeper into the marsh. But he saw nothing. No familiar white face leered up at him; no dark figure was revealed by the light of his flash.

He was somewhere in the southeastern tip of the swamp when he suddenly heard the ticking. The sound was remote at first, as though a watch hung somewhere above him, high in the air. Then, as he listened, it seemed to come from below, from beneath the surface of the water.

And then he saw it and a wave of horror swept through him. A foot beneath the dark waves, gleaming with a ghostly radiance, was the Lorenzo watch. He could see it clearly; the face cover was open, and the hands pointed to six-forty-five. But there was something else, an impossible something that held Hatworth's gaze like a lodestone.

A female hand held that watch; the moving fingers were caressing the case; they touched the stem and began to turn it slowly and deliberately. Even through the water Hatworth could see the movement of the fingers. He gave a scream of terror and pulled with all his strength on the oars.

The boat glided forward a few yards and drifted to a standstill. Again the ticking pulsed through the silence of the marsh; again he saw the watch and the hand in the circle of radiance a yard beyond the gunwhale. In desperation, Hatworth jerked the

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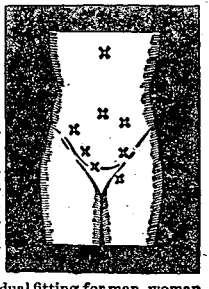

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oar from its lock and brought it smashing down upon the water.

The first blade made a pistol-like report as it struck the surface. Watch and hand vanished in the circle of foam and ripples, only to reappear when the water had quieted, nearer the boat. And then Hatworth gave in to stark fear. Once more he lifted the oar, but as he raised it, he shifted his position on the bottom of the boat, lost his balance and pitched headlong into the lake. He thrashed water violently, but in spite of his efforts, he felt a hand coil about his throat and drag him slowly downward. . . .

MARK BRASH, the undertaker, was pleased when he was told that the dual funeral was the most beautiful the town had seen in a long time. However, there were several matters that perplexed him not a little and dampened his satisfaction.

Brash was one of the group of townsfolk that finally discovered the bodies of Martin Hatworth and his wife, Martha. They lay in a scant four feet of water near the edge of Blackwell Marsh. The body of Hatworth's wife was in a decent enough condition, considering the fact that it had been in the water for several days, and Brash realized he might have been mistaken when he got his first look at the woman's right hand. After all, there was only the uncertain light of a kerosene lantern, and he was not exactly accustomed to his new bi-focals. But he could have sworn that when that hand came out of the water, it was pulsing with life and the fingers were opening and closing convulsively. Yet subsequent observation on the embalming table plainly refuted this.

There was also the odd occurrence of the Lorenzo watch which hung from a chain about Martha Hatworth's neck. That watch showed five minutes past twelve when it was retrieved by Brash at Blackwell Marsh. The next day, however, when he went to place it with the other Hatworth possessions, he noted that the hands had moved. They had, in fact, advanced more than six hours, an imposible action considering the long immersion of the timepiece in water. Yet there it was; the hands pointed to six forty-five.

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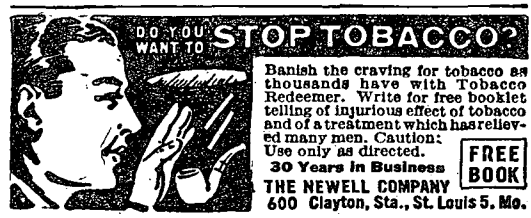

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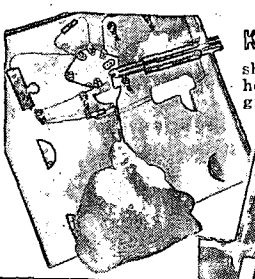

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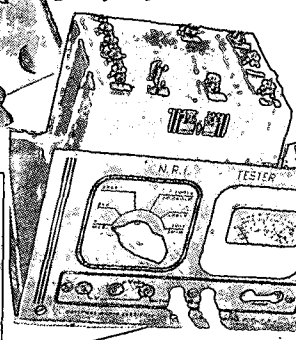

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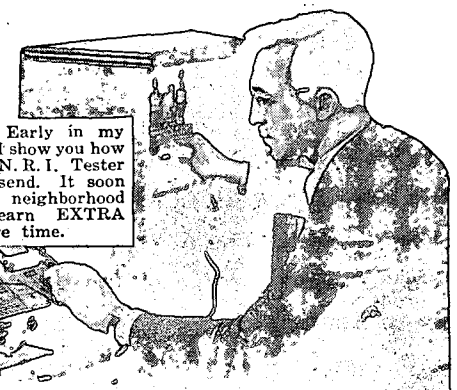

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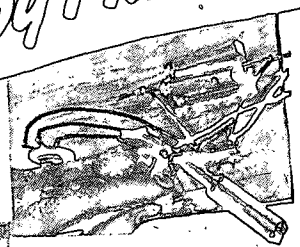

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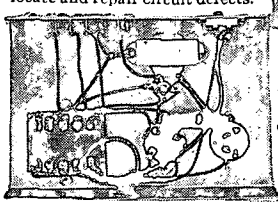

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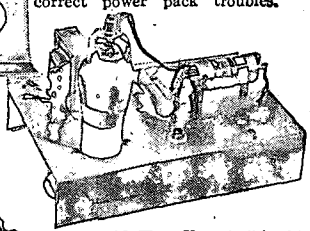

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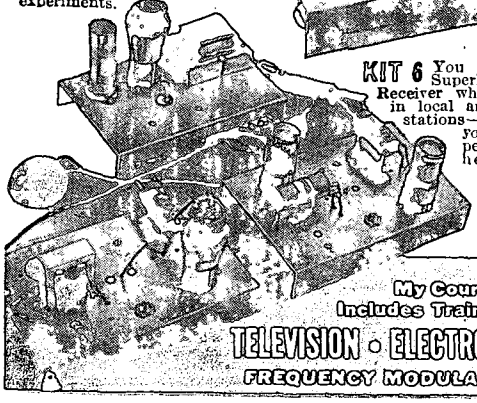

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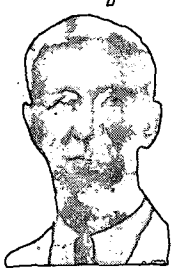

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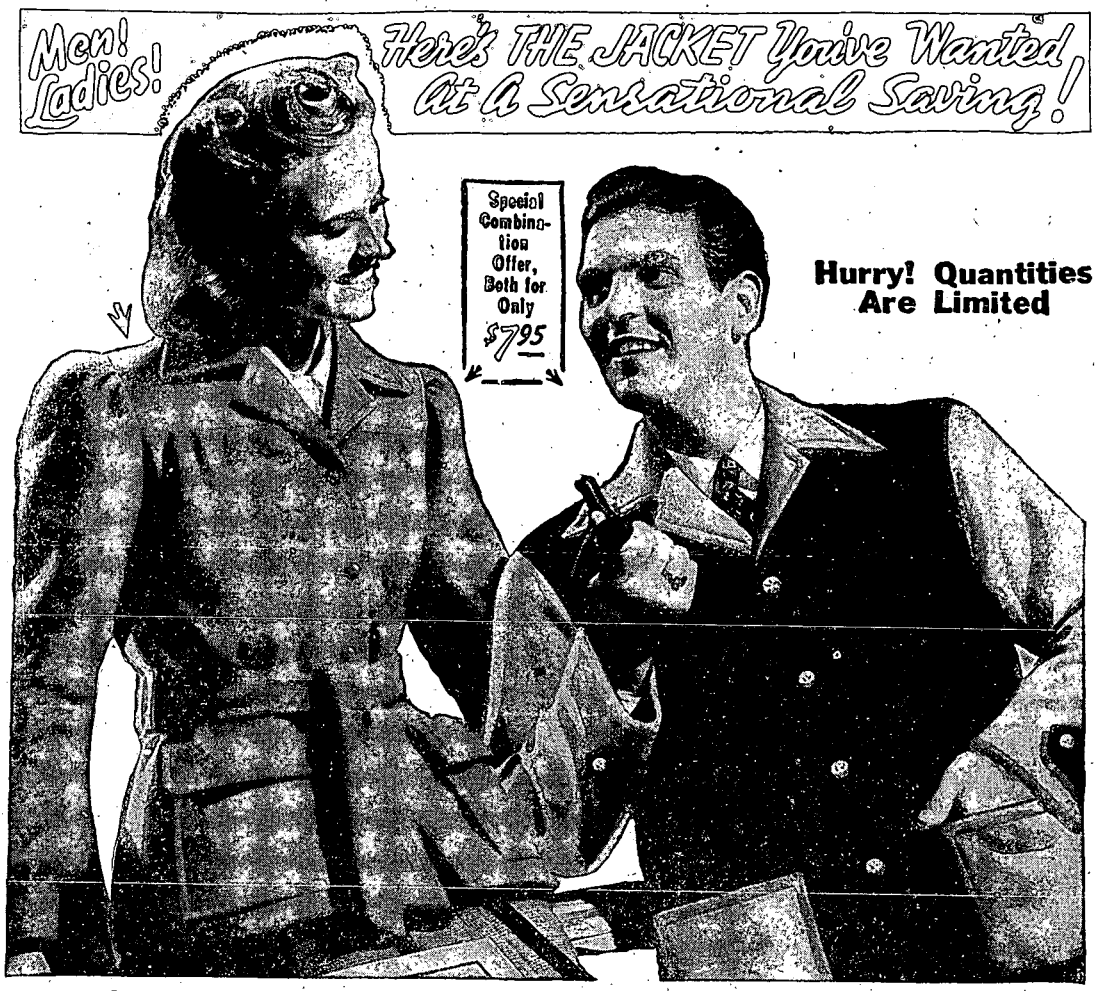

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